

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SHEEP'S HEAD TO TOE HEAD SPA

SITE CODE: 004156

The Sheep's Head to Toe Head SPA is large site situated on the south-west coast of Co. Cork. It encompasses the high coast and sea cliffs from Sheep's Head to Mizen Head, Brow Head and Crookhaven in the west and from Baltimore to Tragumna Bay, Gokane Point and the Toe Head peninsula in the east. The site includes the sea cliffs, the land adjacent to the cliff edge, an area further inland to the east of Dunlough Bay, and also areas of sand dunes at Barley Cove and Crookhaven. The high water mark forms the seaward boundary. Most of the site is underlain by Devonian sandstones and mudstones, though Carboniferous rocks are also found on the Sheep's Head and Toe Head peninsulas.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Chough and Peregrine.

The Sheep's Head peninsula is the narrowest of the large peninsulas in the south-west of the county. Tall cliffs, *c.* 100 m high, occur at its end and hills rise up from much of the coast; pastures are concentrated along the southern side. Much of the land is of marginal agricultural value, with coarse grassland and heath predominating. The Mizen Head Peninsula, on the other hand, has a quantity of semi-improved agricultural grasslands and heath, as well as a sand dune system at Barley Cove. At Mizen Head, large areas of closely bedded sandstones and shales occur, and erosion of their joints has produced a spectacular array of red-brown and pink cliffs up to 130 m high. The cliffs at Three Castle Head to the north are almost 100 m high. Further south and east, a convoluted stretch of coast with sheltered bays, estuaries and exposed headlands extends from Baltimore to Toe Head. The habitats present range from sea cliff, Gorse-dominated heath and rough grassland to good agricultural grassland.

The site supports an internationally important population of breeding Chough, a Red Data Book species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive; 82 breeding pairs were recorded from the site in the 1992 survey and 73 in the 2002/03 survey. The birds are found in pairs and flocks along the coast from Sheep's Head in the north to beyond Toe Head in the south. The Mizen Head cliffs hold some of the highest concentrations of breeding pairs in Ireland.

At Sheep's Head, Chough are concentrated at the tip of the peninsula. An estimated 18 pairs bred in 1992, with 17 recorded in 2002, from Dooneen in the south to Glanroon in the north. Flocking and roosting activity is limited. During the winter of 2003/04, flocks of up to 27 birds were feeding on improved pastures around Caher. Roosting is confined to the southern side of the very extremity of the peninsula, with small numbers, of up to 8 birds, gathering occasionally. At Mizen Head, an estimated 46 pairs bred in 1992 and 32 in 2002, from Crookhaven in the south to Dunkelly in

the north. The highest densities of breeding Chough are on and around Mizen Head itself.

Studies have shown that Chough forage mainly within 300 m inland of the cliff tops used for breeding and these areas have been included in the site. Flocking activity centres on the dunes at Barley Cove and around Dunlough Bay. Twenty-six birds were recorded in the dunes in October 2002, 52 in September 2003 and 26 in June 2004. A flock of 30-40 birds were recorded feeding during the winter of 2003/04, inland from Dunlough Bay on improved pastures and Gorse-dominated areas. Two roosts were identified in 2002 on the Mizen Head Peninsula, one at Brow Head (up to 25 birds), and one north of Mizen Head (up to 55 birds). The remainder of the breeding pairs in the site are scattered along the cliffs between Baltimore Head in the west and Toe Head in the east. A roost at Baltimore Head holds up to 15 birds (winter 2003/04).

The site supports a nationally important Peregrine population (7 pairs in 2002) and a range of other breeding seabirds including Fulmar (57 pairs), Herring Gull (30 pairs), Shag (17 pairs), Kittiwake (20 pairs), Black Guillemot (137 individuals) and Great Black-backed Gull (1 pair) – all seabird data from 1999, 2001 and 2002.

The Sheep's Head to Toe Head SPA is one of the most important sites in the country for Chough, with a breeding population of international importance occurring. It also supports a nationally important Peregrine population. The presence of Chough and Peregrine, both species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, is of particular significance.

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