

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BILLS ROCKS SPA

SITE CODE: 004177

The Bills Rocks are a group of three rocks lying close together, approximately 10 km south of Moyteoge Head on Achill Island, Co. Mayo. The islands are composed of metamorphic rock and are drift-covered. They rise precipitously to a height of approximately 35 m. The two larger islands have flattish tops which are covered by a sward of Thrift (*Armeria maritima*). Other plant species present include Sea Beet (*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*) and Spear-leaved Orache (*Atriplex prostrata*). The sea area to a distance of 500 m from the islands, where Puffins forage and socialise, is included.

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

The site supports a nationally important Puffin population, with an estimated 1,500 pairs in 2001. Puffin is known to have nested here since the early 1800s; numbers have been considerably higher in the past, as, for instance, in 1939 when well over 5,000 pairs were estimated to occur. The rocks also support an important Storm Petrel colony, with an estimate of 500-1,000 pairs occurring.

A range of other seabirds breed, though all in relatively low numbers. A survey carried out in 2001 gave the following results: Fulmar (108 pairs), Kittiwake (105 pairs), Shag (5 pairs), Razorbill (20 pairs) and Great Black-backed Gull (18 pairs). Compared to a survey carried out in 1967 bird numbers have changed considerably – Fulmar has increased markedly (7 pairs in 1967), but the other species have shown decreases: Kittiwake (174 pairs in 1967), Shag (21 pairs in 1967), Razorbill (c.100 pairs in 1967) and Great Black-backed Gull (60 pairs in 1967).

The site is an excellent example of an isolated and highly exposed seabird colony. The Puffin colony is of particular importance as it is of national importance. The presence of an important breeding colony of Storm Petrel is also of note as this species is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.