

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: THE MURROUGH SPA

SITE CODE: 004186

The Murrough SPA comprises a coastal wetland complex that stretches for 13 km from Kilcoole Station, east of Kilcoole village in the north to Wicklow town in the south, and extends inland for up to 1 km in places. The site includes an area of marine water to a distance of 200m from the low water mark. A shingle ridge runs along the length of the site and carries the Dublin-Wexford railway line.

Beside the shingle shore is a stony ridge supporting perennial vegetation. Driftline vegetation on the seaward side includes species such as Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*), Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*), Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) and Yellow-horned Poppy (*Glaucium flavum*). Low sand hills occur at Kilcoole, with Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) and Lyme-grass (*Leymus arenarius*). In other areas and further inland a rich grassy sward, which is most extensive in the south end of the site, has developed. A community dominated by Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) occurs in some of the wetter, grassy areas. In some places, particularly at the south of the site, a Gorse (*Ulex*) heath has developed on the stony ridge.

At the southern end of the site, Broad Lough, a brackish, partly tidal lake, has a well-developed saltmarsh community. Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) is abundant along the western shore, along with some Sea Club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus*). Saltmarsh is also present in the northern end of the site in the vicinity of the Breaches. An area of fen occurs at Five Mile Point. Here, Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) is dominant. Fen Sedge (*Cladium mariscus*) is present where the ground is wetter. This merges into areas dominated by Common Reed. A wide range of freshwater and brackish marsh habitats occur within the site. These vary from reed-marsh dominated by reeds and rushes (*Juncus* spp.), to those of sedges (*Carex* spp.) with other areas supporting a mixture of sedges and Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) also occurring. The marshes merge into wet grassland in many areas and where grazing pressure is low, a herb-rich sward occurs. Sedges are abundant in the wetter areas. Where drains have been cut, there are many other species such as Greater Spearwort (*Ranunculus lingua*), Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and Reed Sweet-grass (*Glyceria maxima*).

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Red-throated Diver, Greylag Goose, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Wigeon, Teal, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull and Little Tern. The E.U. Birds Directive pays particular attention to wetlands, and as these form part of this SPA, the site and its associated waterbirds are of special conservation interest for Wetland & Waterbirds.

The shingle ridge at Kilcoole is a traditional nesting area for Little Tern, and the site now supports one of the largest colonies in the country. Numbers vary between years,

with 36 pairs recorded in 1995 and 106 pairs in 2006. A tern protection scheme and research programme, co-ordinated by BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, has been in operation since 1985. Breeding success varies from year to year, largely due to predation by foxes, crows and other species.

During the winter this site is important for a number of waterbirds - all population sizes are the mean of peak counts for the 5 years, 1995/96 – 1999/2000. Light-bellied Brent Goose occurs here in internationally important numbers (859). Other species that visit here in nationally important numbers are Red-throated Diver (32), Greylag Goose (300), Wigeon (1,209), Teal (644), Black-headed Gull (997) and Herring Gull (506). Other species that are known to occur here are Little Grebe, Grey Heron, Cormorant, Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Greenland White-fronted Goose, Shelduck, Gadwall, Shoveler, Mallard, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Lapwing, Dunlin, Curlew, Greenshank and Redshank.

Short-eared Owl is recorded here during the winter. Little Egret has bred locally in recent years and this site is a main feeding area, with several birds present regularly. While formerly a rare bird in Ireland, Little Egret is now well-established with most birds occurring in the south-east and south (Counties Wexford, Waterford and Cork). The Murrough is presently at the edge of the species' range. This site is one of the few sites in Ireland where Reed Warbler breeds regularly. It is considered that 1-4 pairs bred each year during the 1980s and early 1990s, with a minimum of 6 birds in song in 1993. An absence of records since 1996 may be due to under-recording. Kingfisher regularly uses the site. Sandwich Tern are recorded from the site during the autumn.

The Murrough SPA is an important site for wintering waterbirds, being internationally important for Light-bellied Brent Goose and nationally important for Red-throated Diver, Greylag Goose, Wigeon, Teal, Black-headed Gull and Herring Gull. It is probably the most important site in the country for nesting Little Tern. The regular occurrence of Red-throated Diver, Little Egret, Whooper Swan, Greenland White-fronted Goose, Golden Plover, Little Tern, Sandwich Tern, Short-eared Owl and Kingfisher is of note as these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Part of the Murrough SPA is a Wildfowl Sanctuary.

15.5.2015