

County Wexford Biodiversity

Wexford is a county rich in biodiversity. Habitat biodiversity includes marine, coastal, terrestrial, wetland, freshwater and upland habitats. Wexford has an extensive and diverse coastline which supports a wide range of coastal habitats such as lagoons, dune systems, lakes and reefs of international and national conservation interest. County Wexford supports a diverse range of native species associated with terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine habitats and is regarded as an internationally important stronghold for breeding seabird colonies as well as breeding wildfowl.

The South Wexford Coast is a unique natural heritage coastline. Located in 'the Model County' in the sunny south-east corner of the island of Ireland, the south coast of County Wexford is one of Ireland's special areas of natural beauty and biodiversity. It is special because it supports a wealth of natural heritage resources and a unique cluster of nature sites.

The South Wexford Coast extends from the craggy limestone tip of Hook Head in the west, to the granite foreland of Carnsore Point in the east up to the soft coastline of The Raven. This richly endowed coastal strip supports 11 European designated Natura 2000 sites. To have so many sites of such international importance clustered together on such a short length of shoreline makes the South Wexford Coast one of Ireland's outstanding natural heritage resources.

The sand dunes that decorate the very impressive fringing gravel barriers on the South Wexford Coast and the three coastal lagoons trapped behind them are priority habitats that are flagged for special conservation actions because they are in danger of disappearing within the territory of the European Union. The north Wexford Harbour and Slobs is the lowermost part of the estuary of the River Slaney. The site is divided between the natural estuarine habitats of Wexford Harbour, the reclaimed polders known as the North and South 'Slobs', and the tidal section of the River Slaney. The seaward boundary extends from the Rosslare peninsula in the south to the area just west of The Raven Point in the north. Of particular importance is that it is one of the two most important sites in the world for Greenland White-fronted Goose.

Hook Head is of international importance for its outstanding fossils and geological formations. The tip of the headland and its cliffs are popular spots for sea watching for migrant birds, whales and dolphins.

Bannow Bay is an excellent example of an enclosed estuarine system. The very extensive sand flats and mudflats exposed at low water attract a great diversity of wetland birds in winter including an internationally-important population of Light-bellied Brent Geese. Saltmarshes of exceptional species diversity are found above the mudflats and support Perennial Glasswort, a plant that is confined in Ireland to the South Wexford Coast.

Keeragh Islands. Between May and September, the two, tiny, low-lying Keeragh Islands hold a large, nationally-important colony of breeding Great Cormorants. In winter, the predator-free islands are an important and safe night roost for wildfowl and other birds.

Ballyteige Burrow is one of the most impressive shingle-based dune systems in Ireland. The fixed dunes support several declining plant communities, rare species of lichen and flowering plants. The site also supports a coastal lagoon, mudflats and estuary. The Cull is a wetland rich in waders and waterfowl. The hind-dune slob or polder provides feeding from Whooper Swans in winter.

Saltee Islands. The two Saltee Islands, lying some 5km offshore, are numbered among the best-known seabird sanctuaries in north-west Europe. They are internationally important for holding an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding seabirds, are easily accessible and are one of the best-documented sites in the country. Saltee Island Great is also a major site for spring and autumn land bird, butterfly and moth migration. Grey Seals breed there and the underwater marine life around the islands is both very diverse and of exceptional quality.

Tacumshin Lake is a coastal lagoon (priority habitat in the EU Habitats Directive). The lagoon is a haven for wildfowl and wading birds and is one of the most important ornithological sites in Ireland. The occurrence of internationally important populations of Whooper Swan and Black-tailed Godwit is of especial note. The site is of special conservation interest for holding an assemblage of over 20,000 wintering waterbirds.

Lady's Island Lake is among the biggest and best examples in Ireland of a sedimentary lagoon. The site supports an exceptional diversity of plant and animal life and at least 13 lagoonal specialist species, the highest number for any lagoonal habitat in the country. The critically endangered Cottonweed plant survives on the barrier and is not found growing anywhere else in Ireland. The largest mixed colony of breeding terns in Ireland is found on islands in the lake together with a large colony of Black-headed Gulls. The site has one of the highest diversities of breeding wildfowl species in the country and is of high conservation importance.

Carnsore Point, the south-eastern cornerstone of the island of Ireland, is a hotspot for watching seabirds on passage and is part of a large offshore underwater area protected for its reefs and species-rich marine life. The intertidal and offshore reefs are formed of Carnsore granite, a coarse pinkish-brown rock, and range from very exposed to moderately exposed wave action.

Wexford Harbour and Slobs Special Area of Protection (SPA) is one of the most important ornithological sites in the country supporting internationally important populations of Greenland White-fronted Goose, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Black-tailed Godwit and Bar-tailed Godwit. The site is an important centre for research, education and tourism. Wexford Wildfowl Reserve, located within Wexford Harbour and Slobs SPA, is a Ramsar Convention site, a Biogenetic Reserve and a Statutory Nature Reserve. Parts of the Wexford Harbour and Slobs SPA are also designated as Wildfowl Sanctuaries.

The Raven SPA extends from north of Rosslare Point to Blackwater Harbour on the coast of Co. Wexford. The Raven is an important bird site, being part of the Wexford Slobs and Harbour complex. Of critical significance is that it forms the principal night roost for the internationally important Wexford Harbour population of Greenland White-fronted Goose. The Raven SPA is a breeding site for Little Tern. These birds nest on the shingle and sandy beaches or on offshore sandbanks. Numbers vary a lot between years – this partly related to the suitability of potential nesting habitat after winter storms, which create or destroy sandbars and shingle ridges.

Issues

Some of these habitats are considered under pressure and some of the species that they support are in decline and under threat. There are many reasons why some of this diversity of species and habitats is being lost. The most common reasons are loss and degradation of habitat, introduction of non-native species, pollution, disturbance of species and over-exploitation. One factor in this story is climate change and the resulting coastal erosion with increased storm events our soft coastline is being lost at an increasing rate. Disturbance from recreational pressure is also an ever increasing threat as populations increase so does the need for recreational time and space. However the simple act of people walking dogs off lead along these beautiful unspoilt areas can have a huge impact on species.

While the loss of biodiversity might be regarded as a global issue, action is needed at national and local levels if we are to slow down and stop the rate at which species and habitats are being lost. This is vital to our existence as we rely on nature for so many goods and services such as clean air and water, food and fuel.

Useful links

County Wexford Biodiversity Action Plan

<https://www.wexfordcoco.ie/sites/default/files/content/Environment/BiodiversityComm/Co.%20Wexford%20Biodiversity%20Action%20Plan%202013-2018.pdf>

National Parks and Wildlife Service www.npws.ie

Wexford Wildfowl Reserve

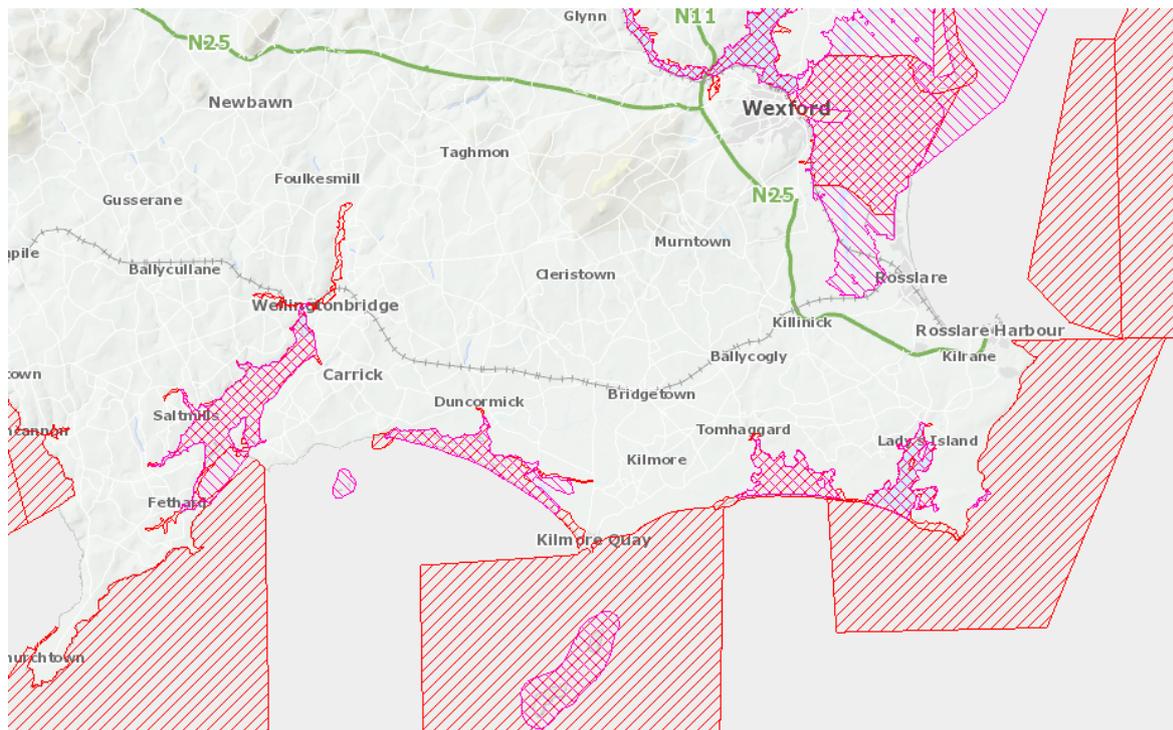
www.wexfordwildfowlreserve.ie



Figure 1 Aerial view of Our Lady's Island



Sanderlings on shore



South Coast of Wexford from Hook Head in the West to The Raven in the East