

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BEARA PENINSULA SPA

SITE CODE: 004155

The Beara Peninsula SPA is a coastal site situated on the west coast of Co. Cork, south-west of the town of Kenmare. It encompasses the high coast and sea cliff sections of the western end of the peninsula from Reenmore Point/Cod's Head in the north, around to the end of Dursey Island in the west, and as far east as Bear Island in the south. The site includes the sea cliffs, the land adjacent to the cliff edge (inland for 300 m) and several upland areas further inland of the coast about Eagle Hill, Knockgour, Allihies and Firkeel. The high water mark forms the seaward boundary. Most of the site is underlain by Devonian sandstones and siltstones, though Carboniferous rocks are found about Black Ball Head and on Bear Island; small areas of igneous rocks occur at Cod's Head, Dursey Island, Black Ball Head and Bear Island.

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

Vegetated sea cliffs dominate the site; these occur along the length of the site and support a good variety of plant species typical of the habitat, including Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and Rock Sea-spurry (*Spergularia rupicola*). The cliff-tops support heath or coastal grassland. Apart from the sea cliffs themselves, the site includes areas of dry heath, wet heath, blanket bog, freshwater marsh, upland acid grassland, dense Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), scrub, semi-improved and improved pasture grassland, dune grassland, exposed rock, streams, shingle, bedrock shores and islets.

The site supports an important population of breeding Chough, a Red Data Book species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive; 62 breeding pairs were recorded from the site in the 1992 survey and 54 in the 2002/03 survey. The birds are found along the coast from Bear Island in the south to Reenmore Point/Cod's Head in the north, including Dursey Island. 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. Inland breeding pairs occur in the Slieve Miskish and Caha Mountains, with additional pairs likely to be breeding on other inland cliffs. The area around the old copper mines at Allihies is regularly used by both breeding birds and a wintering flock. Large flocks of Chough occur on Dursey Island, especially in the summer months, as well as in the uplands, in both summer and winter. The largest flocks recorded are on Dursey Island (42 birds in September 2003), Knockgur (30 birds in July 2004) and Eagle Hill (34 birds in September 2003). Choughs roost in small numbers on the Beara Peninsula; two regularly used roosting sites (identified during a study from September 2003 to August 2004) are Dursey Sound (maximum of 17 roosting birds) and Allihies copper mines (maximum of 37 roosting birds).

The habitats and topography present on the Beara Peninsula favour Chough. It is characterised by marginal agricultural land with large tracts of semi-natural vegetation, all in close proximity to cliffs used for breeding. Small improved fields, along with heath, sometimes dominated by Gorse (*Ulex gallii* and *U. europaeus*), and coarse grassland form an intimate mosaic. Many earth and stone banks and walls, remnants of formerly more intricate enclosed field systems, remain throughout the peninsula. The interior of the Beara Peninsula is mountainous, in places rising to over 650 m, with steep-sided valleys and exposed rock.

Landuse is predominantly extensive grazing of sheep, and to a lesser degree, cattle. This grazing and the resultant tight vegetation sward is beneficial to Chough. The habitats present are quite robust and there are few noticeable activities negatively impacting on the Chough population. However, there is a level of agricultural abandonment. The resultant rank vegetation renders some of these areas unavailable to feeding Chough. Also, the reduction in cattle numbers and increase in sheep numbers in the recent past, is less beneficial to Chough, as sheep grazing results in a more uniform vegetation sward. One other potential threat is the residue left in livestock dung due to the application of broad-spectrum anti-parasitic drugs.

The site also holds a nationally important population of Fulmar (575 pairs) and Black Guillemot (87 individuals in 1999), as well as smaller populations of other breeding seabirds: Shag (12 pairs), Herring Gull (20 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (4 pairs) and Razorbill (5 pairs) – all seabird data from 2000. The site is also used by Peregrine (4 pairs in 2002).

The Beara Peninsula SPA is one of the most important sites in the country for Chough. It also supports a range of breeding seabirds, including populations of Fulmar and Black Guillemot of national importance, as well as a significant population of Peregrine. The presence of Chough and Peregrine, both species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, is of particular significance.

13.11.2006