

## SITE SYNOPSIS

**SITE NAME: WEST DONEGAL ISLANDS SPA**

**SITE CODE: 004230**

West Donegal Islands SPA consists of a series of small to moderate-sized islands lying between 700 m and 3.5 km off the north-west coast of Co. Donegal. It includes the islands of Gola, Inishmeane, Inishsirr (the three largest), Umfin, Go, Allagh, Torglass, Tornacolpagh and Tororraun, as well as a number of smaller rocky islets. The islands are low-lying, the highest point being Knockaculleen on Gola (68 m). The site, which includes the intervening and surrounding seas to 200 m from the shorelines, is highly exposed to Atlantic swells. The predominant habitat of the islands is grassland, with both wet and dry types represented; small areas of dune grassland also occur. Small lakes occur on Inishsirr and Gola. The rocky shorelines have areas of boulders, shingle and coarse sand, and grade into submarine reefs, which are common in the shallow surrounding seas. The islands are uninhabited other than some summer dwellings on Gola and Inishmeane.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Shag, Barnacle Goose, Corncrake, Common Gull and Herring Gull.

The West Donegal Islands SPA supports a nationally important wintering population of Barnacle Goose (272 individuals - four survey mean between 1993 and 2003). The birds use the islands for both feeding and roosting, though at times may commute to other islands off the Donegal coast, such as Inishkeeragh and Inishdoeey.

The site supports a breeding population of Corncrake (13 pairs - five year mean peak between 2003 and 2007, based on records of calling males). The West Donegal Islands SPA is one of a suite of sites along the western seaboard that is regularly utilised by nationally important numbers of breeding Corncrake.

Corncrake winter in southern and eastern Africa, migrating northwards to arrive on their breeding grounds from early April onwards, departing again in August and September. They require the cover of tall vegetation throughout their breeding cycle and are strongly associated with meadows which are harvested annually, where they nest and feed. Annual cutting of these meadows creates a sward which is easy for the birds to move through. Other habitats, which can provide cover for Corncrake in the early and late stages of the breeding season, are also important for this species.

Corncrake is listed on the 2010 International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. This is due to population and range declines of more than 50% in the last 25 years across significant parts of its range.

The West Donegal Islands SPA also supports nationally important breeding populations of Shag (40 pairs on Gola Island in 1999 and 30 pairs on Inishsirr in

2000), Common Gull (20 pairs on Gola Island in 1999 and 55 pairs on Inishirrer and Inishmeane in 2000) and Herring Gull (65 pairs on Gola Island in 1999 and 25 pairs on Inishirrer in 2000). Arctic Tern is known to nest on Inishirrer and possibly at times on Inishmeane. Common Tern may also be present; a total of 25 pairs were present in the 1995 National Tern Survey.

The West Donegal Islands SPA is of high ornithological importance as it supports a nationally important population of Corncrake, a globally threatened species. The site also supports nationally important populations of wintering Barnacle Goose and breeding Shag, Common Gull and Herring Gull. Also of note is that three of the regularly occurring species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, i.e. Barnacle Goose, Arctic Tern and Corncrake.