

COASTAL WETLAND BIRDS AND THE EU BIRDS DIRECTIVE

Oscar J. Merne

*Dúchas The Heritage Service, National Parks and Wildlife,
7 Ely Place, Dublin 2*

THE BIRDS DIRECTIVE

On 2nd April 1979 the European Communities published a Council Directive on the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC), which has become known as the Birds Directive (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1979). Ireland, being a Member State of the European Union, is obliged to implement the Birds Directive here. This Directive is quite short, containing 19 Articles, some of which relate to procedural, administrative and legal matters, e.g. the setting up of a Committee for Adaptation to Technical and Scientific Progress (known as the ORNIS Committee), triennial reporting requirements, amendments to national laws and regulations to ensure compliance with the Directive. There are also Articles relating to the regulation of hunting and trade in wild birds, and to derogations from provisions of the Directive.

The Directive relates to the conservation of all species of wild birds naturally occurring in the Member States, and there is a strong emphasis on maintaining a favourable conservation status for these species and their various habitats. Annex I of the Directive lists species which, because of their rarity or vulnerability, require special conservation measures concerning their habitat. Article 4 of the Directive requires that Member States establish a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the needs of these species.

The SPA network should apply also to regularly occurring migratory species not listed in Annex I and to internationally important bird concentrations, and particular emphasis is placed on the need to protect wetlands, especially those of international importance for birds. The SPAs must be protected from significant pollution, deterioration of habitat and disturbance to birds. The Directive has been transposed into Irish law.

IRELAND'S COASTAL BIRDS

Ireland, being an island with an indented coastline, has many intertidal bays and estuaries which are important for a wide variety of bird species. These birds utilise the intertidal zone primarily for feeding (mainly on invertebrates, small fish, green algae, saltmarsh plants, etc.), and also for roosting. The largest numbers and diversity of birds

occur during the winter months, and during spring and autumn passage migration periods. The great majority are migrants from breeding grounds to the north, ranging from north-east arctic Canada to Siberia. A number of them are included in Annex I of the Birds Directive, while some occur in internationally important concentrations at individual sites. The main species which occur regularly, and in significant numbers, at Irish intertidal wetlands are listed in Table 1, and those which are included in Annex I of the Directive are indicated.

Table 1 Main bird species for which intertidal Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have been designated in the Republic of Ireland and Annex I listing

Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Annex I
Greenland White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>	Annex I
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	
Light-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>	
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	Annex I
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	Annex I
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	
Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	

Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	Annex I
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Annex I
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Annex I

SELECTION OF SITES SUITABLE FOR DESIGNATION AS SPECIAL PROTECTION AREAS

Much is known about the occurrence and distribution of coastal wetland birds from the middle of the 19th century, but the historic information is almost entirely non-quantitative. This made it difficult to establish the relative importance of the wetlands for the various bird species which utilised them. The situation improved greatly from 1960, when systematic censusing of waterbirds began with national censuses of Light-bellied Brent Geese *Branta bernicla hrota* (Merne *et al.* 1999). In the mid-1960s the then Irish Wildfowl Committee (now BirdWatch Ireland) began to encourage the censusing of all wintering waterfowl in Ireland, and Hutchinson (1979) reported on the results of systematic waterfowl censusing in the early 1970s. Based on these it was possible, for the first time, to identify the relative importance for birds of a large number of Irish wetlands. At the same time An Foras Forbartha embarked on a programme of identifying Areas of Scientific Interest in Ireland and all the important waterfowl wetlands were included in the ASIs (Anon. 1981).

Because of the great mobility of migrant waterbirds, changes in their distribution, and the fluctuations in their populations over time, it is necessary to monitor them at regular intervals. The survey and censuses reported by Hutchinson (1979) were repeated in the mid-1980s by Sheppard (1993), and these showed some significant changes in the status and distribution of some species, leading to re-evaluation of the importance of some wetland sites. It was recognised that the survey/census interval of about ten years was too long to identify changes in numbers and distribution as they occurred and so a new, permanent, annual waterbird census was established in 1994/95. This was called the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) and is a joint project of BirdWatch Ireland, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (UK) and Dúchas The Heritage Service. I-WeBS prioritises monthly counts from September to March at the internationally and nationally important wetlands, and the results appear in an annual report (Delany 1996, 1997; Colhoun 1999, 2000, 2001).

The combined results of these surveys and censuses over about thirty years have enabled us to identify with confidence the internationally and nationally important wetlands for waterbirds in Ireland, and, in turn, these wetlands qualify as candidate Special Protection Areas. The main criteria used for selecting wetlands for SPA designation are as follows:

1. An area which is internationally important because it is regularly used by 1% or more of the biogeographical population of a regularly occurring migratory waterbird species.

2. An area which is internationally important because it is regularly used by over 20,000 waterfowl in any season.
3. An area which is nationally important because it is regularly used by 1% of the all-Ireland population of a species, particularly of an Annex I species.

The first two criteria arise from the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (1971).

SPA DESIGNATION PROCESS

The first stage, described above, is the collection of sufficient data to establish the range of bird species, their numbers, and the regularity of their usage of a wetland. The numerical criteria can then be applied and when it is deemed a site qualifies for SPA designation it is formally proposed. Once a site reaches this stage it must be protected as if legally designated, according to case law (EU Commission *vs.* Spain – Santona Marshes) of the European Court of Justice.

The next stage is to produce a definitive large-scale map showing the proposed boundary of the site. There follows a consultative stage where relevant government departments, local authorities, the public and other parties may comment, appeal or object to the SPA proposal, on scientific grounds. Once this stage has been concluded the site (with boundary modifications if appropriate) is formally designated by Statutory Instrument, and the EU Commission is notified. SPAs are included with Special Areas of Conservation in the EU-wide Natura 2000 network set up under the Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive).

INTERTIDAL SPAS FOR COASTAL BIRDS IN IRELAND

To date Ireland has designated 110 Special Protection Areas, of which 80 are coastal. Of these, 40 are islands and mainland cliffs which are important sites for breeding seabird colonies. Of the remaining 40, 34 are intertidal bays and estuaries, which are internationally or nationally important habitats for migratory waterfowl (swans, geese, ducks, waders, gulls, terns, etc.) (Figure 1, Table 2). Work is continuing on the SPA network and it is envisaged that the total number of SPAs in Ireland will be c.160 within the next few years. A number of the new SPAs will be coastal sites. In addition, a number of coastal SPAs will be extended significantly as a result of a review which established the importance of additional areas adjacent to the originally designated sites.

With the I-WeBS project continuing indefinitely, and gradually expanding its geographical coverage, it can be anticipated that new information on waterbird numbers and distribution may lead to the identification of additional candidate SPAs in the medium and long terms. It is also possible that future changes in numbers and distributions of waterbirds at the biogeographical or flyway scale will give rise to the identification of new candidate SPAs. Clearly there is an on-going need for monitoring and periodic review to

ensure that our network of SPAs adequately meets the conservation needs of our migratory waterfowl.

It should be mentioned that coastal wetlands which do not meet the quantitative criteria for SPA designation may, individually or collectively, make an important contribution to waterbird conservation. These sites can receive protection under national legislation (Wildlife Act, 2000) by designation as Natural Heritage Areas.



Figure 1. Location of intertidal Special Protection Areas for coastal birds in the Republic of Ireland. See also Table 1.

Table 2 Intertidal Special Protection Areas for coastal birds in the Republic of Ireland: see also Figure 1

SPA	County
Carlingford Lough	Louth/Down
Dundalk Bay	Louth
Boyne Estuary	Louth/Meath
Rogerstown Estuary	Dublin
Malahide/Swords Estuary	Dublin
Baldoyle Bay	Dublin
North Bull Island	Dublin
Tolka Estuary	Dublin
Sandymount Strand	Dublin
Kilcoole/Newcastle	Wicklow
Broad Lough	Wicklow
The Raven	Wexford
Wexford Harbour	Wexford
Tacumshin Lake	Wexford
Ballyteige/The Cull	Wexford
Bannow Bay	Wexford
Tramore Back Strand	Waterford
Dungarvan Harbour	Waterford
Blackwater Estuary	Waterford/Cork
Ballymacoda	Cork
Ballycotton	Cork
Cork Harbour	Cork
Castlemaine Harbour/Rossbehy Creek	Kerry
Tralee Bay/Barrow Harbour/Banna Strand	Kerry
Shannon/Fergus Estuary	Kerry/Limerick/Clare
Inner Galway Bay	Clare/Galway
Blacksod Bay/Broadhaven	Mayo
Killala Bay	Mayo/Sligo
Ballysadare Bay	Sligo
Cummeen Strand	Sligo
Drumcliff Bay	Sligo
Lough Swilly	Donegal
Trawbreaga Bay	Donegal
Lough Foyle	Donegal/Derry

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