

To the south of Belfast Lough, the seabed off the Ards Peninsula is dominated by stony reef and mixed sands and gravels (often with a notable silt content). The gravelly sands support commercially harvestable seed mussel in geographically limited areas (affected by local hydrography), and further offshore support a scallop fishery (*Pecten maximus*). Mobile bedforms, such as extensive sand waves and banks, are found at Rigg Bank and extending south of the bank.

Offshore of Belfast Lough and off the Maidens Islands the seabed within the site reaches a depth of 125m.

The boundary adjoins the following existing Special Protection Areas –

- Larne Lough SPA
- Belfast Lough SPA
- Outer Ards SPA
- Copeland Islands SPA
- Strangford Lough SPA

This site also subsumes the existing Belfast Lough Open Water SPA

The landward boundary for this marine area is the mean low water mark, medium tide.

The principal interests are as follows – marine area used by –

- Non-breeding population of Great Crested Grebe
- Non-breeding population of Red-throated Diver
- Rafting Manx Shearwater in the breeding season originating from an adjoining colony
- Foraging Sandwich, Common and Arctic Tern in the breeding season originating from adjoining tern colonies

The designation map shows the extent of the proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area.

Qualifying species:

The subsumed Belfast Lough Open Water SPA was classified in 2009 at which time the site qualified for the wintering population of Great Crested Grebe.

The site qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (2009/147/EC) by regularly supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

Species relevant to Article 4.2	Count and Season	Period	% of population
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2466 individuals Non-breeding	5 year mean (1991/92 – 1995/96)	1.6% of the international biogeographical population

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO

In recent years the population of Great Crested Grebe on Belfast Lough Open Water SPA has declined. For the period 2008/09 – 2012/13, the mean Great Crested Grebe numbers were 737 wintering individuals (<1% of the international biogeographical population). Great Crested Grebe has been retained as a qualifying species for Belfast Lough as the population is still

notable (13.4% all-Ireland population) while the site can be of increased importance e.g. as a cold weather refuge. Retention of such site selection features is in line with agreed UK practice.

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.1** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

Annex I species	Count and Season	Period	% of population
Red-throated Diver <i>Gavia stellata</i>	142 individuals Non-breeding	5 year mean (2006/07 – 2008/08)	7.1 % of the all-Ireland population

JNCC targeted site survey

More recently land-based surveys have been undertaken of movements of Red-throated Diver flying into Belfast Lough with matched counts from the County Antrim and County Down shorelines. For the period 2010/11 – 2014/15, the mean Red-throated Diver numbers were 121 wintering individuals (6% of the all-Ireland wintering population).

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.1** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species – figures relate to populations at adjoining breeding colonies:

Annex I species	Count and Season	Period	% of population
Sandwich Tern <i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			
Larne Lough SPA	413 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Outer Ards SPA	353 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	890 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	1656 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	44.8 % of the all-Ireland population
Common Tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i>			
Larne Lough SPA	295 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Belfast Lough SPA	243 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	370 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	908 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	21.6 % of the all-Ireland population

Arctic Tern <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			
Belfast Lough SPA	53 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Outer Ards SPA	141 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Copeland Islands SPA	954 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	203 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	1351 pairs Breeding	5 year mean (2010 - 2014)	38.6 % of the all-Ireland population

Seabird data from annual site monitoring by various bodies and national seabird surveys coordinated by JNCC

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species – figures relate to population at adjoining breeding colonies:

Species relevant to Article 4.2	Count and Season	Period	% of population
Manx Shearwater <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	4800 pairs Breeding	2000–2002	1.7 % of the international biogeographical population

Seabird data from site monitoring by Copeland Bird Observatory and national seabird surveys coordinated by JNCC

The site also qualifies under **Article 4.2** of the Directive (79/409/EEC) by supporting internationally important populations of the following species:

Species relevant to Article 4.2	Count and Season	Period	% of population
Eider Duck <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	3126 individuals Non-breeding	5 year mean (2010/11 – 2014/15)	0.30 % of the international biogeographical population > 90 % of the all-Ireland population

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO