EC DIRECTIVE 2009/147/EC on the Conservation of Wild Birds

PROPOSED EAST COAST (NORTHERN IRELAND) MARINE SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA

Area: 96668.34 Ha Geographic co-ordinates: 54.03.00 N

06.07.00 W

Unitary Authority marine waters adjoining:

Belfast City Council

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Ards and North Down Borough Council Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

County: adjoining County Antrim and County Down

Site description:

The proposed East Coast (Northern Ireland) Marine Special Protection Area includes coastal and near shore waters from Ringfad near Carnlough, Co. Antrim in the north, the marine area of Larne Lough, the marine area of Belfast Lough, waters around the Copleand Islands and offshore of the Ards Peninsula to Cloghan Head, near Ardglass in the south.

The SPA covers a diverse range of seabed habitats, from extensive coastal fringing reefs of various lithologies to the fine silt of inner Belfast Lough.

To the north of Belfast Lough, fringing reef is notable, with substantial areas of coarse sediments and boulders and cobbles offshore from Islandmagee. Further north, towards Ballygally and Carnlough, the glacial till dominates the seabed but also with important areas harbour maerl, a coralline algae (mostly *Phymatolithon calcareum*), known for its associated high biodiversity and for acting as a scallop nursery ground. Rippled sands and gravels are also notable between the relic drowned drumlins that are present off much of the 'Glens of Antrim' coastline. Bedrock outcrops with near vertical sides are found at the Maidens; these reefs and the surrounding sand banks form part of the designated Maidens SAC.

Within Belfast Lough muds grade into muddy sands toward the outer Lough, with extensive areas of cobbles and shell debris overlying the muddy sand. Part of the muddy sand in the outer Lough is bioturbated by Dublin Bay prawn (*Nephrops norvegicus*), and also harbour the Seapen *Virgularia mirabilis*. Topographically complex reef areas surround the Copeland Islands.





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	2466 individuals	5 year mean	1.6% of the
Podiceps cristatus	Non-breeding	(1991/92 – 1995/96)	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 Gavia stellata	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			
Thalasseus sandvicensis			
Larne Lough SPA	413 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Outer Ards SPA	353 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	890 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	1656 pairs	5 year mean	44.8 % of the all-
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	Ireland population
Common Tern			
Sterna hirundo			
Larne Lough SPA	295 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Belfast Lough SPA	243 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	370 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	908 pairs	5 year mean	21.6 % of the all-
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	Ireland population

Arctic Tern			
Sterna paradisaea			
Belfast Lough SPA	53 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Outer Ards SPA	141 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Copeland Islands SPA	954 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
Strangford Lough SPA	203 pairs	5 year mean	
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	
TOTAL	1351 pairs	5 year mean	38.6 % of the all-
	Breeding	(2010 - 2014)	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 Puffinus puffinus	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	3126 individuals	5 year mean	0.30 % of the
Somateria mollissima	Non-breeding	(2010/11 – 2014/15)	international biogeographical population > 90 % of the all- Ireland population

Waterbird data from annual WeBS programme coordinated by BTO