

## PROTECTED SITES

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Ireland is home to 28 species of land mammal, over 400 species of birds, more than 4,000 plant species and over 12,000 species of insect. If we want all of this to survive, we must ensure that there are enough suitable areas for all these species to flourish.

Conserving species in their natural habitats requires a strategic approach to succeed. One of these is to ensure the adequate conservation of habitats where many of our plants and animals live. Rare and fragile species such as the corncrake and the blue cornflower were found all over the country 50 years ago but now have almost disappeared, the demise of these species is linked to change in agricultural practices. To succeed, in conserving our native species we need the support of landowners and people who use or visit the land.

Ireland aims to conserve habitats and species, through designation of conservation areas. This is required of us under European law and our own national laws. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is responsible for the designation of conservation sites in Ireland. The Department works with farmers, other landowners and users and national and local authorities, trying to achieve the best balance between farming and land-use on the one hand, and requirements for conserving nature in these selected areas, on the other.

So far we have mentioned only the land. There is a great array of life in our seas, which few of us ever witness. This too is being affected in a variety of ways, as we seize opportunities for new activities in our coastal and offshore waters; and this too requires protection.

### **Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)**

These are prime wildlife conservation areas in the country, considered to be important on a European as well as Irish level. Most Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are in the countryside, although a few sites reach into town or city landscapes.

The legal basis on which SACs are selected and designated is the EU Habitats Directive, transposed into Irish law in the European Union (Natural Habitats) Regulations, 1997 as amended in 1998 and 2005. The Directive lists certain habitats and species that must be protected within SACs. Irish habitats include raised bogs, blanket bogs, turloughs, sand dunes, machair (flat sandy plains on the north and west coasts), heaths, lakes, rivers, woodlands, estuaries and sea inlets. The 25 Irish species which must be afforded protection include Salmon, Otter, Freshwater Pearl Mussel, Bottlenose Dolphin and Killarney Fern. A full list of the Irish habitats and species covered by the Directive is given here.

The areas chosen as SAC in Ireland cover an area of approximately 13,500 square kilometres. Roughly 53% is land, the remainder being marine or large lakes. Across the EU, over 12,600 sites have been identified and proposed, covering 420,000 sq. km. of land and sea, an area the size of Germany.

### **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)**

Ireland is a special place for wild birds. We are at the end of major flyways of waterfowl migrating south for the winter from North America, Greenland, Iceland and the Arctic. In spring and summer, Ireland provides important breeding grounds for species from the continent of Europe or Africa. Our long coastlines provide safe breeding and wintering grounds for large numbers of seabirds. In addition we have resident species which are scarce or rare in other parts of Europe. Because birds migrate long distances, it is not sufficient to protect them over just part of their range, so the EU Birds Directive provides for a network of sites in all Member States to protect

birds at their breeding, feeding, roosting and wintering areas. It identifies species which are rare, in danger of extinction or vulnerable to changes in habitat and which need protection.

In Ireland, we have 25 of these species regularly occurring. They include Bewicks and Whooper Swan, Greenland White-Fronted and Barnacle Geese, Corncrake, Golden Plover, Bar-Tailed Godwit, five species of tern, birds of prey including Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Merlin as well as the Nightjar, Kingfisher and Chough.

Specific proposals to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in order to safeguard certain habitats pursuant to EU Directive requirements were recently advertised in the local press and on local radio. These proposals are intended to safeguard the habitat of these selected sites.

### **Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs)**

The basic designation for wildlife is the Natural Heritage Area (NHA). This is an area considered important for the habitats present or which holds species of plants and animals whose habitat needs protection.

To date, 75 raised bogs have been given legal protection, covering some 23,000 hectares.

These raised bogs are located mainly in the midlands. A further 73 blanket bogs, covering 37,000ha, mostly in western areas are also designated as NHAs.

In addition, there are 630 proposed NHAs (pNHAs), which were published on a non-statutory basis in 1995, but have not since been statutorily proposed or designated. These sites are of significance for wildlife and habitats. Some of the pNHAs are tiny, such as a roosting place for rare bats. Others are large - a woodland or a lake, for example. The pNHAs cover approximately 65,000ha and designation will proceed on a phased basis over the coming years. (Source: [www.npws.ie](http://www.npws.ie))

[Natural Heritage Area \(NHA\)](#)

[Special Protection Area \(SPA\)](#)

[Special Area of Conservation \(SAC\)](#)