



Wicklow's Wild Coastline

Biodiversity of County Wicklow



Faith Wilson

Rocky headlands and cliffs

Most of the Wicklow coast is formed of 'soft' coastal habitats such as low cliffs of glacial till, shingle beaches and sand dunes, but occasionally the coastline is punctuated by the rocky headlands of Bray, Wicklow, Mizen and Arklow Heads. These headlands are formed of a variety of different rock types; the ancient Cambrian quartzites and shales (with mudstones and greywackes) at Bray and the younger, metamorphic mica-schist at Wicklow. Arklow Rock is formed of rhyolite, a remnant volcanic intrusion.

Many of these rocky headlands support important breeding colonies of seabirds such as Kittiwake, Guillemot, Black Guillemot, Razorbill, Shag, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull and Fulmar. These are best viewed (and smelt) during June and July. This seabird spectacle can be easily viewed from the cliff walk on Bray Head and the local walking track on Wicklow Head. The Peregrine Falcon (the fastest bird in Ireland, which can reach speeds of up to 200km per hour when hunting) and Raven are also regularly seen at these sites.

The tops and slopes of these headlands are often vegetated with a variety of heath and grassland between areas of outcropping rocks. Typical heath species include Ling, Bell Heather, Autumn Gorse, Furze and Broom, with the heathers best seen in full flower in late summer. Other species such as Wood Sage, Spring Squill, Burnet Rose and Bracken are common on Wicklow Head, the easterly point of

Text by Faith Wilson. Design by Michael O'Clery. Thanks to BirdWatch Ireland and all photographers for the use of their images. Cover photos: Yellow-horned Poppy: Faith Wilson. Oystercatcher: BirdWatch Ireland. Risso's Dolphin: Pádraig Whooley/WDG. Common Blue butterfly: Faith Wilson. Aerial photographs of the Wicklow coastline © Ordnance Survey Ireland. All rights reserved. Licence No. 2008/10CCMA/Wicklow County Council.

Produced by the Heritage Office of Wicklow County Council, with assistance from The Heritage Council. This guide is one of a series exploring the Biodiversity of County Wicklow. For further information please contact the Heritage Officer. Tel: 0404 20100 or www.wicklow.ie/heritage

Some useful websites
 An Taisce (Blue Flag/National Spring Clean) — www.antisec.org/projects
 BirdWatch Ireland — www.birdwatchireland.ie
 Eastern Regional Fisheries Board — www.erb.ie
 Irish Seal Sanctuary — www.irishsealsanctuary.ie
 Leave no Trace Ireland — www.leaveanotraceireland.org
 National Parks and Wildlife Service — www.npws.ie
 Notice Nature — www.noticeature.ie
 Wicklow County Council — www.wicklow.ie



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The coastline is an important part of the natural heritage of County Wicklow, providing a mosaic of habitats, which in turn support a diversity of plant and animal life.

Mizen and Arklow Heads. Along the way are rocky cliffs at Bray, Wicklow, shingle coves and extensive sandy beaches and clay promontories (headlands) interspersed with small dunes. Along the way are rocky cliffs at Bray, Wicklow, Wicklow Town, the coast is dominated by low boulder stretches from Greystones to Wicklow Town. South of characterised by a long straight shingle beach, which and composition. The north end of the coast is uniform, the coastline is varied in physical appearance lies roughly halfway along the route. Far from being 60km along the Irish Sea from Bray, south to Kilmichael near Arklow, taking in Wicklow Town, which The coastline of County Wicklow stretches for over

The coastline of Wicklow



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The Murrough

– 80 pairs of Little Tern (Ireland's rarest breeding seabird) return from their wintering grounds off West Africa to nest on the beach. Little Terns are particularly vulnerable to disturbance from people and dogs as they lay their 2 – 3 perfectly camouflaged eggs on the beach amongst the stones. BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service employ wardens, under 'The Little Tern Protection Scheme', each summer to protect the birds and educate visitors. Other birds nesting here include Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover. The marshes and wetlands inland of The Murrough are bisected by a variety of deep drainage ditches and channels, and species such as Otter, Kingfisher and Irish Hare can be seen here.

'The Murrough' is a 15 km long coastal wetland site, stretching from Wicklow Town north to Ballygannon just south of Greystones. This area contains a rich diversity of habitats dominated by an extensive ridge of shingle, which forms a continuous barrier along the coast and carries the main Dublin to Rosslare railway line. The shingle beach consists of areas of smooth rounded pebbles interspersed with fine sand particles. Surprisingly a variety of plant species is found here, despite the lack of obvious soil for plants to grow in. Common species include Sea Beet, Sea Campion, Sea Mayweed, Restharrow, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Ribwort Plantain, Wild Carrot, Ladies Bedstraw and Sea Sandwort. Some of the more unusual plants found at Newcastle include Sea Kale and Yellow-horned Poppy. (See *A Guide to The Murrough Wetlands*, Wicklow Heritage Office, 2006.)

Ireland. Species typical of the shallow soils around outcropping rocks include English Stonecrop, Sea Campion and Sheep's-bit Scabious. The upper cliffs of these headlands are often open and grass dominated with Tormentil, Milkwort, Heath Bedstraw, Sea Pink, Wild Thyme, Kidney Vetch and Red Fescue. Navelwort is also common. The sea cliffs below the headlands are sparsely vegetated with Sea Plantain, Common Scurvy-grass, Rock Sea-spurrey, Thrift, Sea Campion, and Sea Samphire. A number of rare and scarce plants are recorded from these headlands. They include Bird's-foot, Greater Broomrape, Yellow Fumitory, Spring Vetch, Bird's-foot Clover and Knotted Clover. Other species of note at Bray Head include the locally scarce Tree Mallow and Wild Madder.



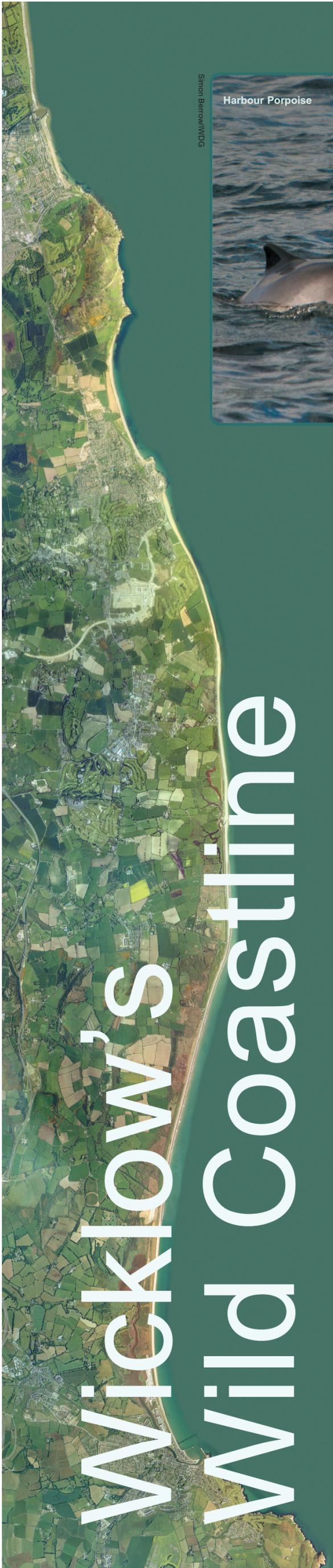
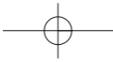
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Restharrow

Life in the shingle

One of the best areas of shingle beach is found near 'The Breaches' at Kilcoole, where the Kilcoole Marshes drain to the sea. Each summer between 50





Simon Barrow/WDG



Harbour Porpoise



Sea Holly

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Guillemots

Ken Kinsella



Dunlin

Clive Timmons

Saltmarshes — mud, glorious mud

Thin areas of saltmarsh can be found along the margins of Broadlough and at Kilcoole where species such as Common Saltmarsh-grass, Sea Aster, Sea Purslane, Sea Lavender and Common Scurvy-grass are found. At low tide a number of wintering waders such as Curlew, Whimbrel, Dunlin and Redshank (each equipped with a specially adapted beak to feed on the invertebrates living deep in the mud) can be seen feeding in this area.



Sandy beaches and dunes

There are extensive sand dune systems at Magherabeg, Brittas Bay and Buckrone. Some of these dune systems are of recent origin – the dunes at Buckrone only formed in the early 1900's, which gives us an idea of how dynamic these habitats are – constantly growing and moving. Areas of shifting sand become tamed by the roots of Marram Grass and Sea Couch, which bind and hold the sand, resulting in the development of embryonic dunes. These continue to build in height, eventually reaching over 10m. Between the Marram Grass, species such as Sea Bindweed, Sea Holly, Sea Spurge and the rare Moore's Horsetail are found. Further inland in the shelter of the dunes a carpet of Bird's-foot Trefoil, Restharrow, Dog Daisy, Pyramidal Orchid, Seaside Pansy and Ladies Bedstraw provide rich foraging for butterflies and moths such as the Clouded Yellow, Common Blue, Hummingbird Hawkmoth, and Six Spot Burnet Moth. Areas of Creeping Willow, Silverweed, Marsh Helleborine, rushes, sedges as well as rare and scarce plants, such as Wild Asparagus, Sharp Rush and Green-flowered Helleborine, can be found in and around the dune slacks. Rabbit warrens are frequently evident in the dunes, Kestrels hunt overhead and Skylarks and Meadow Pipits fill the summer air with song.

Offshore banks - natural defences

The Codling and India offshore banks form a natural barrier to the eroding force of an easterly gale in the Irish Sea, and are our first line of defence in coastal erosion on this coast. They are also a source of natural replenishment for the shingle and sand materials of the county beaches and shores. They

provide a nursery ground for Plaice and Herring, while Sand Eels and Scallops are found in the sandy sea bottom offshore. These are rich feeding grounds for Manx Shearwaters, Common Scoter, Razorbills and Guillemots. Grey Seals, Harbour Porpoise and Risso's Dolphin may also be seen.

Conservation of the coastline

Legal protection is provided for coastal habitats through various EU and National designations such as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Area (SPAs) and proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs). Protected sites include Bray Head, Kilcoole Marshes, The Murrough Wetlands, Broadlough, Wicklow Reef and Wicklow Head, Magherabeg Dunes, Buckrone-Brittas Dunes and Fen, Arklow Sand Dunes and Arklow Rock Askintinny. In addition, some sites, such as Brittas and Buckrone are protected as National Nature Reserves. Visitors can do their part by adopting the principles of 'Leave no Trace' — leaving coastal sites as they find them, and participating in clean-up initiatives. Littering, trampling on dunes, picking of wildflowers and the removal of natural beach material all threaten the biodiversity of our coast. Incidents of these activities should be reported to Wicklow County Council and/or the local wildlife ranger.

Visitor information

Many of County Wicklow's coastal sites are publicly accessible. Bray Head and the Cliff Walk can be accessed from car parks at Bray Head and Greystones. The Murrough can be walked from the car park at Kilcoole, south to the car park north of Wicklow Town. There are two public car parks at Brittas Bay providing easy access to this popular bathing area. Many of the county beaches qualify for Blue Flag status, for details contact the Wicklow Environmental Awareness Office, The Murrough, Co. Wicklow, on 1890 222 276 or eao@wicklowcoco.ie.



Moore's Horsetail

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Meadow Pipit

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Common Blue

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Sea Spurge

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Dune vegetation

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