

## **Overview of the importance of Irish Sea Offshore Waters for Seabirds**

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This short piece will focus on the Irish Sea waters below and beyond the low water mark, as an introduction to why ‘developers’ and the statutory authorities need to give high priority to potential impacts of offshore infrastructure on seabird populations. We urge readers to follow the link to BirdWatch Ireland’s Policy Statement on Marine Matters. Further information on seabirds and tern conservation projects can also be found on that website.

Ireland’s location on the Atlantic edge of Europe ensures we have a much richer maritime biodiversity compared to most other European countries. Not surprisingly, as top predators, birds are very good indicators of this and with our long length of coastline, large number of islands and vast acreage of territorial waters, we are internationally important for a wide range of seabirds. These include sites supporting over 20,000 birds at any time of year (Ramsar Convention sites), breeding colonies holding more than 1% of the European, or bio-geographic, population of a species listed in Annex I of the EC Birds Directive of 1979 (e.g. Storm Petrels on the Blasket Islands of Kerry and Roseate Terns on Rockabill, Dublin). During the breeding season, seabirds need access to a healthy food resource (i.e. fish) within a ‘reasonable commuting distance’ of their colony to provision their chicks.

However, for the rest of the year they also need access to food in their wintering range or on migratory corridors connecting their winter and breeding/summering ranges. Some seabird species such as male Guillemots become flightless for a short period during their flight-feather moult while they accompany their offspring as they depart from a colony in summer. Thus, this is an especially crucial time for them and the areas they occupy then need sensitive management.

For some species, the three month nesting season is their only period ashore, and the rest of the year is spent well out to sea, e.g. Fulmars, Guillemots and Razorbills and Kittiwakes though adult birds will return to their colonies for a few days at a time at irregular intervals through the non-breeding season. Puffins move much greater distances and probably winter out in the Atlantic. Manx Shearwaters spend their winters in the South Atlantic off Brazil and are thus true long-distance migrants. All of our five species terns winter in tropical climes off the west coast of Africa though Arctic Terns reach the Southern Ocean. Other species must return to land each evening to roost (sleep), e.g. Cormorants and Shags. Shags, together with Black Guillemots, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls probably spend most of the year relatively close to their breeding colonies.

Thus, there are always thousands of seabirds in the Irish Sea at any time of year though the composition of the ‘community’ is always changing. An important part of the European population of Little Gulls, a bird seldom seen by shore-based observers, actually migrate into the Irish Sea for the winter from their eastern breeding areas. Here they join other migrants such as Red-throated Divers and Common Scoters coming from the Arctic and boreal areas. Although the Irish Sea is regarded as a shallow-shelf sea, most seabirds generally forage in the shallower parts. This is why the

'banks' running down the east coast of Ireland (Kish, Codling, Arklow, Blackwater etc.) are so important. These shallow banks are currently the key target area for offshore wind farm development. In line with best international practice, no development should be permitted on these banks until a Strategic Environmental Assessment has been carried out and a well-planned management system for the ecosystem introduced."

According to the Marine Institute's strap-line "*Ireland is 90% undiscovered, underdeveloped & underwater*".

We need to proceed cautiously if we are to help protect the planet via harnessing renewable energy in our offshore environment.

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