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Killala Bay/Moy Estuary

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North of Ballina town, the River Moy flows to the sea via a long, narrow estuarine channel. After approximately 8km, the estuary widens to form a north-facing triangular bay, with the towns of Inishcrone (Co. Sligo) and Killala (Co. Mayo) situated on the eastern and western shores, respectively. The estuary itself forms the county boundary along its northern part. A long sandy island (Bartragh Island) separates the south-western side of the bay from the open water. Much of the inner part of the bay is intertidal. The northern part shelves to approximately 10m.

Extensive sandflats and mudflats are exposed in the estuary and bay at low tide. For the most part, these flats are unvegetated, but mats of eelgrass (*Zostera* spp.), beaked tasselweed (*Ruppia maritima*) and green algae (*Enteromorpha* spp.) occur which provide important feeding sites for birds (see below).

The dune systems at Bartragh Island, Inishcrone and Ross, to the north-west, are well-developed and constitute good examples of stabilised dunes with a rich and diverse flora. The familiar species Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) is abundant here and it serves to bind the loose sand and stabilise the dunes.

Also present are pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), kidney vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), fairy flax (*Linum catharticum*) and harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*).

In sheltered coastal areas behind the flats are strips of saltmarsh. Species commonly observed there include sea aster (*Aster tripolium*) and thrift (*Armeria maritima*). Occasionally, lax-flowered sea-lavender (*Limonium humile*), sea rocket (*Cakile maritima*) and sea rush (*Juncus maritimus*) are also present.

Elsewhere along the coastline are sandy beaches, shingle beaches and some bedrock shores which are occasionally backed by clay sea-cliffs.

Southeast of Killala town, Lough Meelick is an additional, non-coastal habitat in the site. It is significant for the presence of the thin-lipped mullet, a species which is only occasionally found in the region.

Opposite-leaved pondweed (*Groenlandia densa*) has been recorded in the Moy Estuary. This species has been recorded from only three sites in the Republic since 1970 and its decline has been attributed to drainage and pollution of its habitats. Hoary Whitlograss (*Draba incana*) has been recorded from sand dunes along the coast east of Killala town. Both of these species are Rare and Threatened as listed in The Red Data Book.

Brent geese overwinter in the bay in internationally important numbers (average peak 270; counts from two seasons between 1984/85 - 1986/87). Six species of waterfowl have been recorded on the site in regionally/locally important numbers, including wigeon (absolute maximum 560; information compiled in 1987).

The main threats to this site are uncontrolled or accidental emissions into the estuary/bay from Ballina town (sewage) and from the chemical (ASAHI) plant located at Killala. This would deleteriously affect habitat quality, bird and fishlife. Within the site boundary, the main landuse practices are connected with amenity. The Moy Estuary is a renowned area for salmon fishing. Inishcrone Golf Course impinges on the dunes there, with some sandhills flattened and their vegetation improved. Expansion and/or modification of the Course poses a significant threat to the dune complex. At Ross, the sandy grasslands are fenced and improved for pasture, with a resulting reduction in naturalness and habitat quality. Stretches of the shoreline are accessible to grazers and tractors, causing some damage to saltmarsh habitats.

This composite site has a remarkable range of good quality coastal habitats, but it is of particular importance as an overwintering site for brent geese. The dune complex at Bartragh Island is relatively undisturbed and is considered to be one of the best in the country, in terms of its naturalness and intact state. The dunes at Inishcrone and Ross are considered to be of regional importance. The site is extremely scenic and is a significant regional amenity area for its beaches and for fishing.