



# The Murrrough Wetlands



Low sand hills and shingle beach at Killougher

## A geological formation

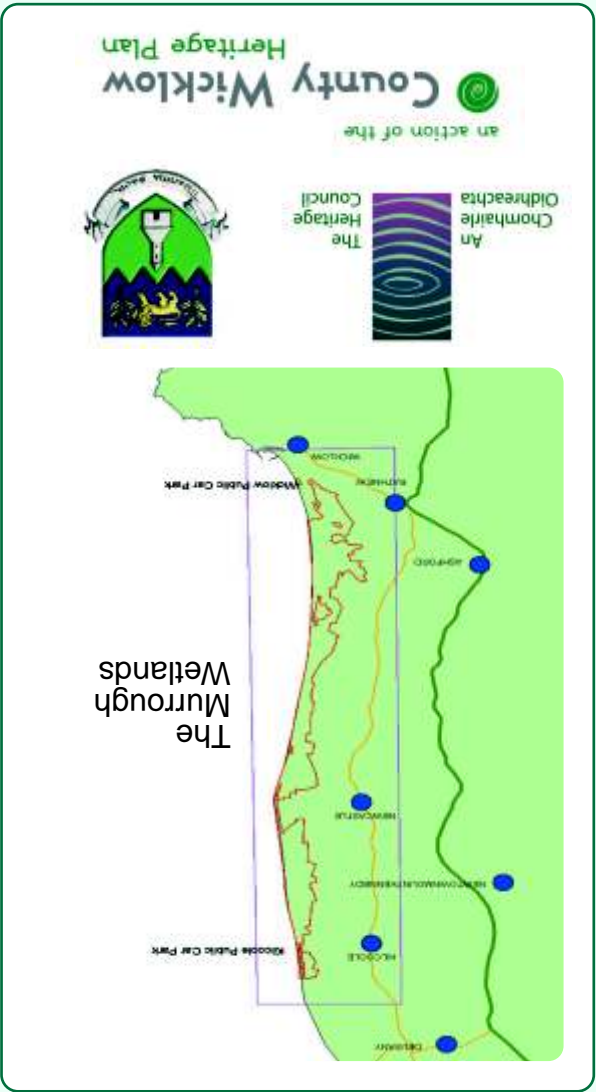
This remarkable coastal barrier is formed from sand and gravels, which were deposited in the Irish Sea after the last glaciers of the Ice Age retreated some 16,000 years ago. As the land rose and the sediments were redistributed, long shore drift resulted in the deposition of these materials along the coast in a high ridge (currently c.4m above sea level) which protects the low lying marshes inland from erosion and flooding. The name Murrrough comes from the Irish word 'murbhach' which means a saltmarsh along the sea.

## Shingle beach

At first glance the shingle beach can seem devoid of life but a number of specialised plants and animals live here. This is a harsh environment for a plant to thrive in as it has to cope with an unstable substrate, lack of water and nutrients, high winds and regular salt spray. Plants are adapted for this in different ways and some, such as Sea Rocket and Sea Sandwort grow each year from seed using the nutrients created by rotting seaweed and other debris along the high tide

The Murrrough is publicly accessible, visitors may walk the entire length along the coast and can access the area via the car parks at Wicklow Town and Kilcoole.

Produced by the Heritage Office of Wicklow County Council with support from The Heritage Council.  
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Thanks to BirdWatch Ireland and all photographers for the use of their images.  
Text by Faith Wilson. Design by Michael O'Clery.  
Cover photos: Common Spotted-orchid by Faith Wilson, Little Terns by Andrew Kelly, Rabbit by Christian Osithoff, Peacock Butterfly by Michael O'Clery.



BirdWatch Ireland



The Murrrough is a 15 km long coastal wetland site, which stretches 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. Inland of this ridge are salt-marshes, mudflats, freshwater and brackish marshes, small sand hills, reedbeds, drainage ditches, wet grasslands, wet woodland, and alkaline fen while offshore are the sandbanks of the Codling and India Banks.

## The Murrrough Wetlands

Dick Coombes



Yellow-horned Poppy

mark. These and several other plants (known as halophytes) use salt to draw fresh water into their cells. When they become too salty the salt is excreted. Others such as Sand Couch and Lyme Grass use lateral roots to bind and trap the sand and gravels beneath them. The Yellow-horned Poppy has a deep



Billy Clarke

Kingfisher

tap root to reach water and is covered in fine hairs which help retain water, reflect much of the sun's heat and provide a protective layer from the salt. You might need more luck and patience to find the Marsh Pea which was found in the 1970s after an absence from the site of 130 years!

The Kilcoole Marshes drain to the sea at 'The Breaches' south of Kilcoole. This is the widest area of shingle along the coast and each summer provides a home to a colony of Little Terns, which are Ireland's rarest breeding seabird. These graceful birds (nicknamed 'sea swallows') migrate each spring from West Africa to nest on the shingle at The Breaches forming the most important colony on the East Coast with c.50 – 80 pairs nesting every year. They lay 2–3 perfectly camouflaged eggs amongst the stones and are very vulnerable to disturbance from people and dogs. 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.



Ringed Plover





# The Murrough

Clive Timmons



Redshank



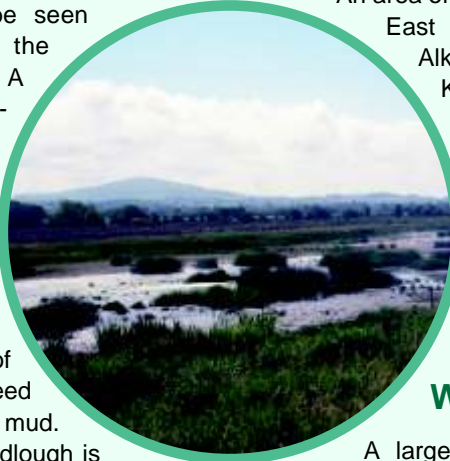
Sea Holly

Dick Coombes

## Saltmarshes and mudflats

Remnants of a former salt marsh (damaged by drainage and the creation of embankments) can be seen along the margins of the lagoon at The Breaches. A

better example is found along the margins of Broadlough at the southern end of the site. Typical salt marsh plants include Common Saltmarsh-grass, Sea Aster, Sea Purslane and Common Scurvy-grass. At low tide the exposed mudflats provide a muddy take away for a number of waders such as Curlew, Whimbrel, Dunlin and Redshank, each of which has a specially adapted beak to feed on the invertebrates living deep in the mud. One of the most recent arrivals to Broadlough is the Little Egret – a bird of the Mediterranean. This small elegant white heron is now breeding at Broad Lough and is generally seen at the waters edge.



## Freshwater marshes and reedbeds

Immediately south of the railway station at Kilcoole an area of freshwater marsh dominated by Yellow Iris and Sedges is owned and managed by BirdWatch Ireland for a variety of wildfowl. A sluice gate controls the water levels in the marsh providing breeding habitat for Mallard, Snipe, Redshank, Lapwing and Water Rail. After the breeding season the reserve is grazed by cattle, which helps to keep the pools and channels open providing rich foraging areas for autumn migrants and wintering waders. North of the railway station and south of Five Mile Point are large reedbeds which are a favoured site for feeding Swallows and martins.

## Wet grassland

Despite efforts to drain the marshy lands of The Murrough over many years these low lying areas remain wet, supporting breeding species such as Lapwing and Snipe and providing feeding areas for winter visitors such as Whooper Swans, Curlew and Brent Geese. Hares are often seen here during the summer months and Otters and Grey Heron use the drainage ditches and channels to forage in for the Common Frog. Species such as Ragged Robin, Silverweed, Ladies Smock, Meadowsweet and a variety of colourful orchids are found in these areas.



Six Spot Burnet Moth



Grey Heron

Clive Timmons



Yellow Iris

BirdWatch Ireland

Stonechat



Clive Timmons

Otter



Eddie Dunne

## Sand hills

A summer walk down the Murrough provides the visitor with a profusion of colour for the eye. A carpet of Bird's-foot Trefoil, Restharrow, Dog Daisy, Pyramidal Orchid, Sea Bindweed and Sea Holly provide rich foraging for butterflies and moths such as the Clouded Yellow, Common Blue, Hummingbird Hawkmoth and Six Spot Burnet Moth. These areas are vulnerable to erosion and visitors are asked to keep to the existing tracks. Meadow Pipits and Skylarks nest inland from here. At the northern end of Broadlough an area of Gorse provides territories for Stonechat and Linnet.

## Alkaline fen

An area of fen is found at Five Mile Point and at the East Coast Nature Reserve at Blackditch.

Alkaline fen is also found at Grange and Killoughter. Species such as Black Bog-rush, Marsh Pennywort, Purple Moor-grass, Ling and Cross-leaved Heather are common and a wide variety of orchid species are also present. Saw Sedge, a local species, is present where the ground is wetter. These areas provide important habitats for a variety of Molluscs.

## Wet woodland

A large wet woodland occurs at Blackditch, dominated by Downy Birch, Alder, Willow and Ash. This wood also contains a rich insect community including several rare fly species.

## Offshore waters and sandbanks

The Codling and India 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 also 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 Little Gull, Red-throated Diver, Razorbills and Guillemots. Grey Seals, Harbour Porpoise and Risso's Dolphin may also be seen.

In recognition of the rich diversity of species and habitats present, this area is legally protected as a Special Protection Area (for birds), a Special Area of Conservation, and a proposed Natural Heritage Area. Why not come and explore it today!

Risso's Dolphin



Padraig Whorley/WDG

Irish Hare



Clive Timmons