



Site Name: Mount Brandon SAC

Site Code: 000375

This site comprises the central and north-western parts of the Dingle Peninsula. It is a mountainous area that encompasses several peaks including Mount Brandon (952 m), which is the highest peak outside of the Macgillycuddy's Reeks, Brandon Peak (840 m), and the Stradbally range which includes Beenoskee (826 m). The site includes the high sea cliffs of Brandon Head, as well as low-lying areas such as the Owenmore River/Cloghane River valley. Glaciation has played a large part in shaping the landscape into a series of ridges and valleys, with corrie lakes and steep cliffs. The underlying geology features Old Red Sandstone and Dingle Beds (the oldest Devonian rocks in Ireland). Conglomerates are also present.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

- [1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs
- [3110] Oligotrophic Waters containing very few minerals
- [3130] Oligotrophic to Mesotrophic Standing Waters
- [4010] Wet Heath
- [4030] Dry Heath
- [4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
- [6230] Species-rich *Nardus* Grassland*
- [7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
- [8110] Siliceous Scree
- [8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes
- [8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes
- [1029] Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*)
- [1421] Killarney Fern (*Trichomanes speciosum*)

Arctic and arctic-alpine species, including important bryophyte and lichen assemblages, are found on the dramatic north- to east-facing inland cliffs and on the alpine heath of the highest ridges (above 750 m). Species present include Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*), Alpine Bistort (*Polygonum viviparum*), Alpine Saw-wort (*Saussurea alpina*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Alpine Lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla alpina*), Alpine Hair-grass (*Deschampsia alpina*), Alpine Meadow-grass (*Poa alpina*), Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*), saxifrages (*Saxifraga stellaris* and *S. rosacea*), and ferns such as Holly Fern (*Polystichum lonchitis*), Green Spleenwort (*Asplenium viride*), Wilson's Filmy-fern (*Hymenophyllum wilsonii*) and Brittle Bladder-fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*).

These inland cliffs correspond to the habitats Calcareous Rocky Slopes, Siliceous Rocky Slopes and Siliceous Scree, and are particularly important for their range of rare oceanic bryophyte species, including *Adelanthus lindenbergianus*, *Scapania nimbosa*, *S. ornithopodioides*, *Lejeunea* spp. and many more.

The most common habitats within the site are heath, upland grassland and blanket bog. The heath occurs in areas of shallow peat and on the mineral soils of the mountain sides. It varies in nature from dry to wet. The dry heath is dominated by Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*), while the wet contains Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.). The dry heath often grades into upland grassland which supports a range of characteristic grasses: Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) and Viviparous Fescue (*Festuca vivipara*).

Areas of blanket bog occur on level or gently sloping ground. There are three main areas of particular interest: two upland bogs and a lowland, valley bog. Coumanare Bog is an impressive tract of mountain bog dominated by Purple Moor-grass and Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*). It features a large and particularly well-developed scraw (i.e. area of floating vegetation), associated with a series of springs along the Scorid River, where bog mosses dominate (e.g. *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. auriculatum* var. *auriculatum*, *S. papillosum* and *S. subnitens*). Another upland blanket bog, located on the south-facing slopes of Beenator and Coumbaun Mountains, is heavily grazed and dominated by Deergrass, Heather and Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*). Some of the lowland bog in the Owenmore River/Cloghane River valley is intact and is dominated by Deergrass, with Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Purple Moor-grass, Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*) and bog mosses also occurring.

Oligotrophic corrie lakes are a feature of the site, including a string of Paternoster lakes below the Brandon range. Characteristic plant species found include Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*), Quillwort (*Isoetes lacustris*) and Six-stamened Waterwort (*Elatine hexandra*).

Vegetated sea cliffs, which stretch for some 12 km along the north-western edge of the site, are amongst the highest in Ireland (over 400 m above sea level). The cliffs support a good variety of plant species typical of the habitat, including Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*). Populations of a number of relatively scarce plants, including Roseroot, Irish Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rosacea*) and Mountain Sorrel also occur. The cliff tops support heath or coastal grassland, and here such species as Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and Allseed (*Radiola linoides*) are found. The scarce Small Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum azoricum*) has been recorded from cliff tops in the site.

A suite of rare Red Data Book plant species have been recorded, associated with the inland cliffs and alpine heath: Alpine Bistort, Alpine Meadow-grass, Alpine Saw-

wort, Alpine Lady's-mantle and Holly Fern. Mount Brandon is one of the most southern locations in Britain and Ireland for Alpine Bistort, a species which is protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015. Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea*), also a Red Data Book species, occurs at several locations within the site. In Ireland this species is found only on the Dingle Peninsula. Killarney Fern (*Trichomanes speciosum*), protected under the E.U. Habitats Directive and the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015, occurs within the site.

A population of Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*) occurs within the site. This is an endangered species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Other fauna of interest recorded from the site includes Large Heath (*Coenonympha tullia*), a vulnerable butterfly, and Arctic Char (*Salvelinus alpinus*), a Red Data Book fish species found recently in Anascaul Lough.

The Dingle Peninsula supports some of the highest densities in Ireland of breeding Chough, a Red Data Book species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The abundance of Chough on the peninsula was first noted in the 1800s and has been demonstrated in recent surveys. In the site the birds are particularly to be found close to the Brandon Head sea cliffs, but also as large roosting flocks in several inland upland areas, as at Ballybrack, Lough Doon, Anascaul Lough and Arraglen. Peregrine, also an E.U. Birds Directive Annex I species, uses the site, as well as a variety of seabird species that breed on the sea cliffs.

The main land use within the site is sheep grazing. The serious effects of over-grazing are widespread and are exacerbated by the upland, exposed nature of the site. Other threats come from turbarry and afforestation. Part of the site is state-owned, the Mount Brandon Nature Reserve.

The site is of high conservation value due to the presence of good quality examples of 11 habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, as well as populations of two species that are listed on Annex II of this Directive. The presence of the E.U. Birds Directive Annex I species, Chough and Peregrine, as well as of populations of a suite of rare Red Data Book plant species, adds considerably to the significance of the site.