

Carlingford Lough Special Protection Area



Sandwich Terns (Stephen Maxwell)

A Special Protection Area (SPA) is a designation under the European Union Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds. Under the Directive, Member States of the European Union have a duty to safeguard the habitats of migratory birds and certain particularly threatened birds.

With the correct management, SPAs have been shown to make a significant contribution to the conservation needs of these notable species, together with other species using the designated sites.



Light-bellied Brent Goose
(Geoff Campbell)

Collectively, they provide a network of important sites at regional, national and international scales.

Carlingford Lough SPA has been selected because of the important populations of breeding Sandwich and Common Tern, together with the non-breeding population of Light-bellied Brent Geese. The SPA provides suitable habitat to meet their various needs including sites for breeding (for the Tern species), feeding and roosting.

The tern species are migratory visitors, coming to Carlingford Lough to breed, usually using Green Island for nesting and feeding on a range of small fish in adjoining coastal waters. Sand-eel is a particularly important prey item.

After breeding, Sandwich Tern spend our winter around the coasts of the western Mediterranean as well as western and southern Africa,



Common Tern
(Laurie Campbell)

although increasingly some birds are present through the winter. Common Tern also avoid the winter blues by spending our winter in coastal waters around southern Africa.

In contrast, the non-breeding Light-bellied Brent Geese enjoy a relatively mild winter in Northern Ireland compared to conditions they would be exposed to if they remained on their breeding grounds.



Light-bellied Brent Geese in flight
(Laurie Campbell)

Their breeding areas are in high latitudes of north-east Canada and they migrate via Greenland and Iceland to Ireland every year, making the return journey in the spring back to the breeding grounds.

Ireland is a particularly important site for Light-bellied Brent Geese, with almost all of the world's breeding population wintering on coastal sites here. Most of these visitors spend at least some time feeding on Lough Foyle and particularly Strangford Lough before dispersing to other sites including Carlingford Lough.

The geese are highly dependent on inter-tidal swards of Eel-grass as their main food although they will also eat a range of other grasses and algae.

The purpose of the SPA is to ensure that shoreline, intertidal and adjoining nearshore marine areas of the Carlingford Lough

area are managed to meet all the needs of these species while they are with us and that the habitats they use are maintained year-round.



Light-bellied Brent Geese
(Paul Corbett)

The Carlingford Lough area is of course a very busy place with a lot of human activities including businesses, industry, shipping, commercial fishing and shellfish production and

land and water based recreational activities.

The SPA designation means that any new projects, developments or other significant activities (including changes to existing activities) within or beyond the site are assessed to ensure they will have no direct or indirect impacts on these bird populations or the habitats on which they depend.

The objective is to achieve a site that continues to benefit our society, but not at the cost of losing these internationally important bird populations.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency aims to work with site owners and users to ensure that special places like Carlingford Lough are protected for the future.