



Chough. Photograph: Andrew Malcolm

BirdWatch Ireland Reserves



County Donegal: Sheskinmore Lough

Dave Suddaby describes the attractions of Sheskinmore Lough Reserve in southwest Donegal

Sheskinmore Lough Reserve in County Donegal was established in the early 1980s. It extends to around 15 hectares.

The reserve forms part of the extensive Sheskinmore Lough Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) managed by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**.

The area was formerly of international importance for its wintering population of **Greenland White-fronted Geese**, but numbers using the site have declined since the 1980s, consistent with an overall population decline. Even so, a visit at any time of year offers a different and rewarding experience.

Exploring the reserve

During the winter months the distinctive calls – which could be described as ‘high-pitched with a laughing quality’ – of some 25 or so **Greenland White-fronted Geese** echo across the reserve as they fly to and from their roost site to feed on the special machair grassland. Also to be heard is the charismatic ‘chow’ call of **Choughs** as they search for food amongst the dunes.

The sight and sounds of **Whooper Swans**, **Teal**, **Mallard**, **Lapwing** and **Golden Plover** feeding on the grasslands and lough can also be enjoyed. You may also be fortunate enough to see a wintering **Hen Harrier** quartering back and forth or a **Merlin** dashing through the reserve, often in pursuit of a local **Meadow Pipit**.

As winter turns to spring and then summer, the machair grasslands are transformed with the emergence of wild flowers. Orchid species are well represented, particularly **Marsh Orchids**. The rare **Dense-flowered Orchid**, first discovered on our lands in 1982,



Mix of habitat types at Sheskinmore Reserve. Photo: Dave Suddaby

can still be found in the surrounding area.

During these months the sounds of breeding birds can be heard, in particular the calls of male **Lapwings** as they perform their aerobatic tumbling display flight over the wet grasslands. These sounds are often accompanied by the songs of **Skylarks**, **Sedge Warblers** and **Reed Buntings**.

You may also hear the distinctive reeling song of **Grasshopper Warblers** coming from the reedbed on a late summer evening as well as the drumming of male **Snipe** over the wetter areas. Careful scanning of the lough may also provide views of **Otters** as they bathe and feed.

Looking closer, some very rare insects can be found, such as **Marsh Fritillary** and **Small Blue** butterflies. Along the water's edge, **Black-tailed Skimmer** dragonflies patrol back and forth, whilst hidden in the wet grassland is the rare **Geyer's Whorl Snail**.

As summer turns to autumn and the **Yarrow** starts to flower, the colour of the machair grasslands turns golden; purple **Autumn Gentians** can be found amongst the Yarrow.

What is happening at Sheskinmore Lough

We aim to manage the reserve for the benefit of wintering geese and breeding waders, without detriment to the machair ecosystem and its other important wildlife, while contributing to priority species

conservation and, where practicable, providing a natural place for people to enjoy wildlife. To accomplish this, we work closely with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and local farmers, in particular aiming to:

- Provide wet grasslands for wintering birds, particularly geese
- Enhance breeding wader numbers, particularly Lapwing numbers, and provide protection from mammalian predators (work that is supported by the **Halting Environmental Loss Project**)
- Encourage breeding Dunlin to re-colonise
- Enhance the habitats through appropriate grazing regimes, to improve the wider biodiversity appeal of the site.

Visitor information: How to find us

By car or bike

There are three signed access points to the reserve. Two of the access points are to the east of Sheskinmore Lough on the R261, approximately 6km north of Ardara (which is on the N56 between Killybegs and Glenties). Parking is available at the NPWS McGlinchey's Field Centre, and from here it is a short walk to the bird-viewing hide. The second access point is on the same road, about half a kilometre further south.

The third and main entrance is at Mullyvea, opposite Kiltorris Lough, approximately 11km



Greenland White-fronted Geese



north and west of Ardara on the road to Rossbeg. An information board is found at the gate.

By public transport

There is no public transport available anywhere near Sheskinmore, although taxis can be taken from Ardara.

Entry

Visitors are asked to respect the habitats and wildlife of Sheskinmore Lough by keeping to

the marked walking trails at all times and to be cautious of grazing animals, especially between October and April.

The trails give a view over the whole area, and a public bird-viewing hide is located to the south of the lough.

Some of the land that the trails cross is privately-owned, so please be careful to close all gates and not to climb over fences or walls. Please keep dogs on a lead and under control at all times.



Sheskinmore marsh with dunes on the left in the distance. **Photo:** Dave Suddaby

Don't miss.....

- **Greenland White-fronted Geese** during the winter months
- **Choughs** tumbling around in the dunes
- **Hen Harriers** quartering back and forth on a winter's day
- **Lapwings** breeding within the wet machair grassland fields
- **Orchids** bringing colour to the machair grassland through the summer months
- **Marsh Fritillary** and **Small Blue** butterflies in the summer months
- **Black-tailed Skimmer** dragonflies patrolling the lough edge on warm summer days.



SHAY CONNOLLY

We hope you enjoy your visit!

➡ Further information about Sheskinmore Lough Reserve is available on the **Friends of Sheskinmore** webpage <http://sheskinmore.wordpress.com> or from BirdWatch Ireland.