BirdWatch Ireland response to Oriel Wind farm application Offshore Renewable Energy

A submission by staff at BirdWatch Ireland

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Introduction

BirdWatch Ireland is Ireland's leading charity focused on the conservation of wild birds. Established in 1968, we currently have over 15,000 members and supporters and a local network of over 30 branches nationwide. As an organisation, our conservation team is actively involved in seabird conservation, research and monitoring. Our policy and advocacy team are active stakeholders contributing to marine conservation at a national and EU level. We are proud members of Birdlife International, the Irish Environmental Network, Stop Climate Chaos, and the Sustainable Water Network, and a founding partner of the Fair Seas coalition.

Our vision is that Ireland should become a world leader in marine conservation and the sustainable management of our marine environment. As an island nation, Ireland could be a pioneer in ocean protection within the EU by putting in place ambitious legislation to protect at least 30% of Ireland's sea by 2030, with at least 10% strictly protected. BirdWatch Ireland is calling on the government to expand Ireland's network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to protect our seabirds, marine life, and ecosystems. An ecologically coherent network of well-managed and well-resourced MPAs will enable Ireland to meet its commitments under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the OSPAR Convention, and the Kunming-Montreal Agreement under the UN Convention on Biological Biodiversity (COP15). In addition, it is critical that existing coastal and marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have complete Conservation Objectives and management plans put in place to restore favourable conservation status for many declining seabirds and waterbirds.

Whilst the protection and restoration of Irish marine ecosystems is vital, so too is rapid decarbonisation. The Intergovernmental Panel on Biological Diversity (IPCBD) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) make it clear that we face twin climate and nature emergencies. BirdWatch Ireland therefore supports the production of offshore renewable energy (ORE), including offshore wind; however, ORE devices and infrastructure must be sensitively located to minimise negative impacts on seabirds, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and other biodiversity including terrestrial bird species.

BirdWatch Ireland's marine science background

For many years BWI has been working to gather data and information on the importance and usage of our marine environment for seabirds and waterbirds. Our work in the Irish Sea includes tagging and tracking of seabirds at key sites, Digital Aerial Survey (DAS) work and observations on the daily movements and flight lines of a range of seabirds. The latter has been part of our annual monitoring and management of key seabird colonies in the Irish Sea for than 20 years.

General observations on the impacts of ORE windfarm projects.

The main impacts of ORE windfarm projects on seabirds and waterbirds include displacement and collision risks, for which reports have been submitted. However, possible impacts and questions remain, briefly set out in broad terms below:-

-Cumulative impacts - how are the cumulative impacts being examined? We believe it is not enough to state the cumulative impacts will be assessed as part of the site assessments for each project.

-Wider ecolgocial impacts on fish stocks/prey base, particularly during construction. Knowledge of the impact on the prey base/fish stocks is essential to be able to fully assess the impacts on seabirds. This is not addressed in any of the reports.

-Impacts on fishing effort and location – how will fishing efforts be shifted and what is the likely impact of such a shift? This has also not been addressed.

- Impacts on non seabird secies, waterbirds and other larger birds using the air space. The flight heights are not known for key species and this data has not been collected, as the digital aerial surveys don't collect height data. This impact has therefore not been assessed.

We do not believe that these broader issues have been comprehensively assessed and questions on the impacts on seabirds and waterbirds remain.

BWI concerns about overlap with the distribution and foraging areas of key species

We are also concerned that there are key data gaps and questions remaining on the impact of the windfarm on important species, that have been omitted from the many ornithologcal reports which have been submitted. We set out some of these concerns below, but due to a lack of capacity within our organisation and the very tight timescales for scrutiny of the large number of reports submitted, there may well be other questions.

1. One of the most important colonies we have monitored and managed over many years is Rockabill, which is the closest internationally important seabird colony the the Oriel Wind Park development site. Our staff have over many years observed large numbers of auks (Guillemots and Razorbills) moving north-south past Rockabill during the summer months, likely to be heading to foraging grounds in the north Irish Sea and which may well include usage of the proposed wind farm area. These birds almost certainly breed on Lambay, and although we have GPS-tracked both species on the island, the feeding areas we typically located were to the east of the island. We are aware of work conducted at other large seabird colonies that showed birds breeding in different sub-colonies on the island used very different foraging areas (Bogdanova et al. 2014, Biological Conservation 170:292-299) . Our previous auk-tracking work probably did not sample the sub-colony of birds that use the north-south corridor passing Rockabill. More information on the movements of Guillemots and Razorbills from Lambay is needed to show that there is no significant impact.

2. Great Northern Diver - Annex 1 species
   Both the Wind farm company data – Figure 1a and BWI data Figure 1b, indicate that that the footprint of the wind farm area is important for wintering Great Northern Divers (GND), a species known to be vulnerable to boat-based traffic disturbance in the winter, from October to April. It is likely that that concentration of GNDs in the outer Dundalk Bay area, where the windfarm is proposed, reach thresholds for international importance (50 birds) (Lewis *et al* 2019).

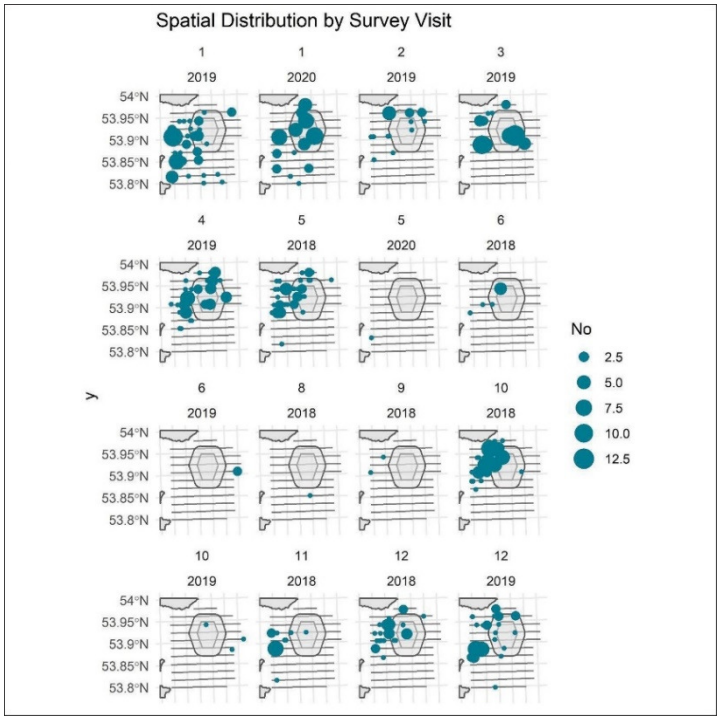

Figure 1a: Figure 5_7 reproduced from *Appendix 11-1: Offshore Ornithology Technical Report,* showing the numbers of Great Northern Divers recorded. All months from October to May in at least one year recorded this species in the proposed wind farm area.

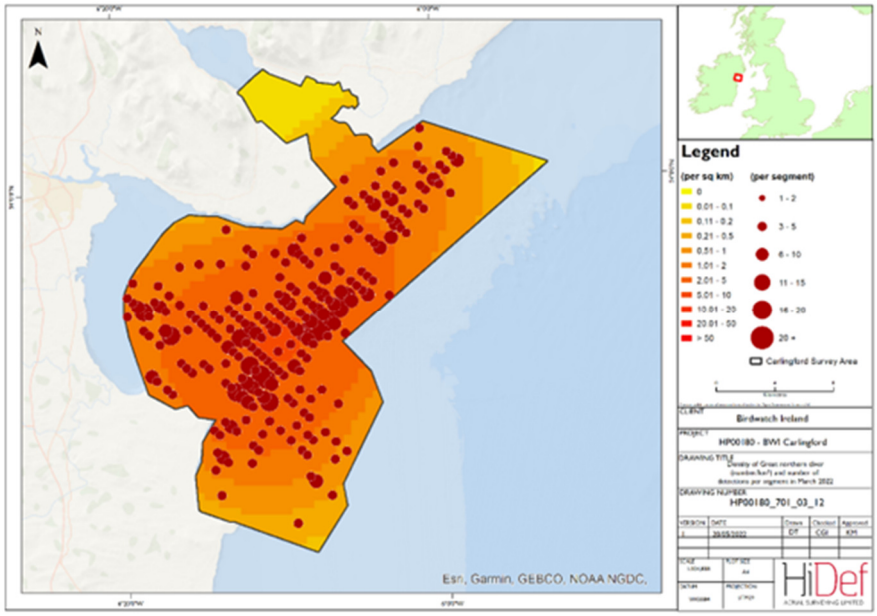

Figure 1b: Density of great northern divers (number/km²) and number of detections per segment ithe Carlingford survey area in March 2022. Reproduced from Birdwatch Ireland: Carlingford. High-resolution video aerial ornithological and marine megafauna survey. Density Report – March 2022 – Survey 01. Hi Def Report to BirdWatch Ireland June 2022. Funded as part of the MarPAMM project.

Due to the likely importance of this area for this species, construction works should be avoided during this period. This leaves a very narrow window of opportunity for construction works that would avoid the main seabird breeding season and the wintering period for this species.

3. Light-bellied Brent Goose:

We believe that the data collection and methods for the Migratory Geese Survey Report (Appendix 11_03) were inadequate. The timings and location of the fieldwork undertaken were not adequate to assess the movements (direction and flight altitude and timing) of Brent Geese (i) bdispersing from Strangford Lough to key estuaries in Co.'s Louth and Dublin, which occurs in September and October and (ii) during the late spring period when birds are returning northwards to their breeding grounds.

Fieldwork was only undertaken outside these main migration and dispersal periods and only small scale local movements in mid winter and spring around Carlingford and Dundalk would have been detected.

It is likely the flight path of these geese during these main migration movements would pass directly through the Oriel development area in September and October and again in late spring. The importance of this area for this species has therefore not been recorded by the survey methods. Tracking data showing the movements of Brent Geese from Strangford to estuaries on the Louth and Dublin coasts is required to be able to rule out any impacts on this species from the development.

Brief comments on the Natura Impact Statement

- The project design parameters for onshore and intertidal SCI birds was described in section 5.2.3 under 'onshore biodiversity and benthic subtidal and intertidal ecology', as follows - Reduction of impact on sites designated for nature conservation - Timing of the works at the landfall location (i.e. transition joint bay, the onshore cable route construction, and the offshore cable construction where it occurs between the LWM and HWM) **will avoid the peak season for intertidal birds (October to April, inclusive).** Timing of vegetation removal works will avoid the bird nesting season (March to August, inclusive).

  Later in the NIS, the discounting of impacts upon waterbirds largely relies on this conservation measure/design feature. **BUT** As the landfall location lies outside of a SPA designated for wintering waterbirds (shorebirds), clarification is required (regarding conclusions on Page 213) as to whether this design feature (timing of works) will extend to the intertidal landfall location, which falls inside an I-WeBS site (Dunany Point to Clogher Head, Site Code 0Z901). Table 5.5. in the NIS specifically relates these protective measures to SPA sites. Yet Dunany Point falls outside of Dundalk Bay SPA and the North-West Irish Sea SPA does not pertain to shorebirds.

Disturbance measures Timing of the works at the landfall to avoid the peak season for overwintering birds using intertidal wetland areas of SPA sites (October to April, inclusive). Timing of vegetation removal works to avoid the bird nesting season (March to August, inclusive). Avoidance of light spill during night-time hours, and badger buffer zones between 30 m and 150 m depending on works type and season. See appendix I: Biodiversity – Supporting Information for specific detailed measures.	These measures have been designed into the Project to reduce the potential disturbance effects on protected species and their use of habitats upon which they depend.

And

Reduction of impact on sites designated for nature conservation Timing of the works at the landfall location (i.e. transition joint bay, the onshore cable route construction, and the offshore cable construction where it occurs between the LWM and HWM) will avoid the peak season for intertidal birds (October to April, inclusive). Timing of vegetation removal works will avoid the bird nesting season (March to August, inclusive).	These measures have been included in the Project to reduce the impact on designated sites for nature conservation (including European sites).

In addition, if the timing is scheduled to avoid wintering waterbirds, **and** to avoid the bird breeding season, this leaves very little time to complete the works. The NIS concludes no impact because the receptor (i.e. wintering waterbirds) will not be present, but how will the landfall works be achieved? Our experience is that the timing of intertidal works is so often ignored once planning permission is granted.

- Also, during AA, there appears to be little mention of *ex situ* impacts upon species listed for Dundalk Bay SPA that occur outside the red-line boundary and could distribute south near Dunany Point. It is quite possible that waterbirds from Dundalk Bay extend south along the coastline as many wading birds leave intertidal areas and roost along rocky/shingle shores). For instance, surveys recorded a flock of 300 Grey Plover roosting on rocks. These birds are highly likely to be associated with Dundalk Bay SPA.

Concluding Statement

In the last few months BirdWatch Ireland staff have agreed a programme of work with four windfarm consortia currently seeking consent off the east of Ireland, including the Oriel project, to better monitor breeding seabird numbers and productivity at the key colonies in County Dublin: Lambay, Ireland's Eye. Howth Head and others. This work commenced in May 2024, is ongoing and needs to be repeated in 2025 and beyond. In parallel, a targeted programme of GPS-tracking work on the key species that utilise to Oriel development area, namely Gannet, Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwake needs to be undertaken. This work should be concentrated on the two closest SPAs, north cliffs of Lambay (all species) and Rockabill (Kittiwakes only).