



Puffin (Brenda Sheridan)

Statement by Coalition 2030 and BirdWatch Ireland relating to Marine Protected Areas to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Maritime Affairs and Fisheries

January 13 2026

Karen Ciesielski representing Coalition 2030

Chair, Committee members,

We wish to thank members of the Committee and the Secretariat for the opportunity to speak today. Coalition 2030 is an alliance of more than 70 civil society organisations and trade unions, working together to hold Ireland accountable for its commitment to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Our vision is for Ireland to fully implement the SDGs at home and to contribute to their achievement internationally. The SDGs present an interconnected social and environmental policy roadmap, setting out guiding principles which, if enacted, would ensure that we stay on course towards a sustainable future. Coalition 2030 aims to create a world where efforts are made to slow down and reverse the damage to our climate, habitats and species, to make our societies fairer and healthier while building stronger communities. We want a world where taking care of nature also means taking care of all living creatures, ensuring that we can feed ourselves now and in the future.

Goal 14 calls for the conservation and sustainable use of our oceans. Ireland's maritime territory is vast, and yet, it faces significant threats from overfishing, habitat destruction, and the impacts of climate change. We urge the Government to prioritise SDG 14 within national policies and commit to protecting our marine environment for current and future generations. Marine Protected Area legislation is being developed, which was a commitment set out in the Programme for Government, and we are still waiting to see the Bill. The process needs to move much more swiftly if we are to effectively meet our targets, stop further harm and restore marine biodiversity.

Onagh Duggan representing BirdWatch Ireland (for the Environmental Pillar)

A Cathaoirleach and members of the Committee,

BirdWatch Ireland is a charity whose mission is the conservation of wild birds and other biodiversity in Ireland. We have 15,000 members and local branches nationwide that host around 400 events annually for the public. We are also a founding partner of the Fair Seas coalition.

We have been involved in marine matters for many decades. In the last 30 years through dedicated conservation action and restoration of habitats, we increased the population of one of Europe's rarest seabirds, the Roseate Tern on Rockabill island, from **152** breeding pairs to **1,597** pairs. This work is funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. We also undertake active conservation work for Little Terns at Kilcoole Co Wicklow and several tern species at Lady's Island Lake in Wexford and we work in conjunction with The Dublin Port Company on conservation of the tern colonies within the busy port environment.

Ireland is internationally important for seabirds

Ireland is one of the most important countries in the EU for seabirds not only because of the sheer numbers of breeding pairs and their diversity but also because our territorial waters are globally important for species that pass through or feed during winter.

People who enjoy nature flock to see seabirds especially the Puffin in places like Great Saltee in Wexford, Skellig Michael in Kerry, Cape Clear and Galley Head in Cork, the Bridges of Ross and Loop Head in Clare, Tory Island and Horn Head in Donegal and Ireland's Eye in Dublin.

Accessible breeding seabird colonies are an important form of eco-tourism and generate income for local people often in remote areas at the coast from where visitors take ferries, have lunch or stay over on their visit. Done properly and with wardening to prevent disturbance to the birds at the vulnerable breeding time, seabird watching is an important income generating endeavour that supports local communities.

Conservation Status of Seabirds in Ireland

Twenty-three of Ireland's twenty-four breeding seabirds are Red or Amber-Listed Birds of Conservation Concern. The Kittiwake and the Puffin are also globally vulnerable. Pressures include over-fishing, disturbance at breeding colonies, predation by rats, climate change, avian flu and marine plastics. Seabirds are also the species group that are most threatened by offshore renewables and so renewables infrastructure must be very carefully planned to avoid impacts. Seabird sensitivity mapping is of huge assistance to the sector in this regard and national plans for offshore wind should be informed by sensitivity mapping.

Identifying important areas for seabirds in Irish waters

One gap in our knowledge was that we didn't know exactly what parts of Irish territorial waters were most important for Ireland's breeding seabirds for foraging and wintering. So, in 2023 and in conjunction with our partners at BirdLife International we started a project to fill that gap. We collated and analysed all available survey and tracking data and assessed this data against BirdLife International criteria¹. In 2025 we published our findings and a map of the 49 colony and 24 marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, or IBAs, for Ireland's 24 breeding seabirds². **See the maps in figures 1 and 2.**

IBAs are internationally recognised including by the European Court of Justice. They are NOT a form of designation in themselves. The Irish government has a legal obligation under Article 4 of the Birds Directive to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for seabirds on land and in the sea to cover all elements of their life cycle. Government has started the process to designate SPAs in the sea. We are calling on the government to designate as SPAs those important areas for seabirds that we have identified which are not already designated. That would be 8 of the 49 breeding colony sites and the 24 marine sites.

¹ <https://datazone.birdlife.org/about-our-science/ibas>

² Our report outlining the methodology as well as maps and links to each site can be found on our website here <https://birdwatchireland.ie/ibas-for-seabirds-in-ireland/>

The European Court of Justice has ruled many times that Member States are required to designate as SPAs **all of the areas which based on ornithological criteria appear to be the most suitable** for the conservation of the bird species. This must be done solely on ornithological criteria and not economic criteria. This means that the Irish government cannot cherry pick which parts of Irish waters to designate in favour of other economic interests. In addition, government cannot designate just 'sufficient' areas for seabirds as this is only permissible under the Habitats Directive. **If the marine IBAs for seabirds were designated in their entirety, it would achieve 7% of the 30% target.**

An effectively managed and ecologically coherent MPA network

Effective management of these MPAs is also absolutely essential. The Birds and Habitats Directives include good management requirements but Ireland has been very weak in implementing these to our detriment. Government must step up and commit to managing sites effectively for marine biodiversity.

The Nature Restoration Law also affords Ireland a unique opportunity to halt losses and reverse them. It states that Member States **shall** put in place restoration measures **for the marine habitats of wild birds necessary to improve the quality and quantity of those habitats, including by re-establishing them, and to enhance connectivity, until sufficient quality and quantity of those habitats is achieved.** We would expect that the requirements of the Nature Restoration Law will also be included in the MPA legislation.

The web of life in the sea is interconnected and it is intrinsically connected with the needs of human beings. Our oceans are soaking up global carbon emissions. We must start taking seriously the protection, conservation and restoration of habitats and life that depends on the sea or we will have nothing left. Thank you.

Figure 1: 24 Marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas for seabirds in Ireland

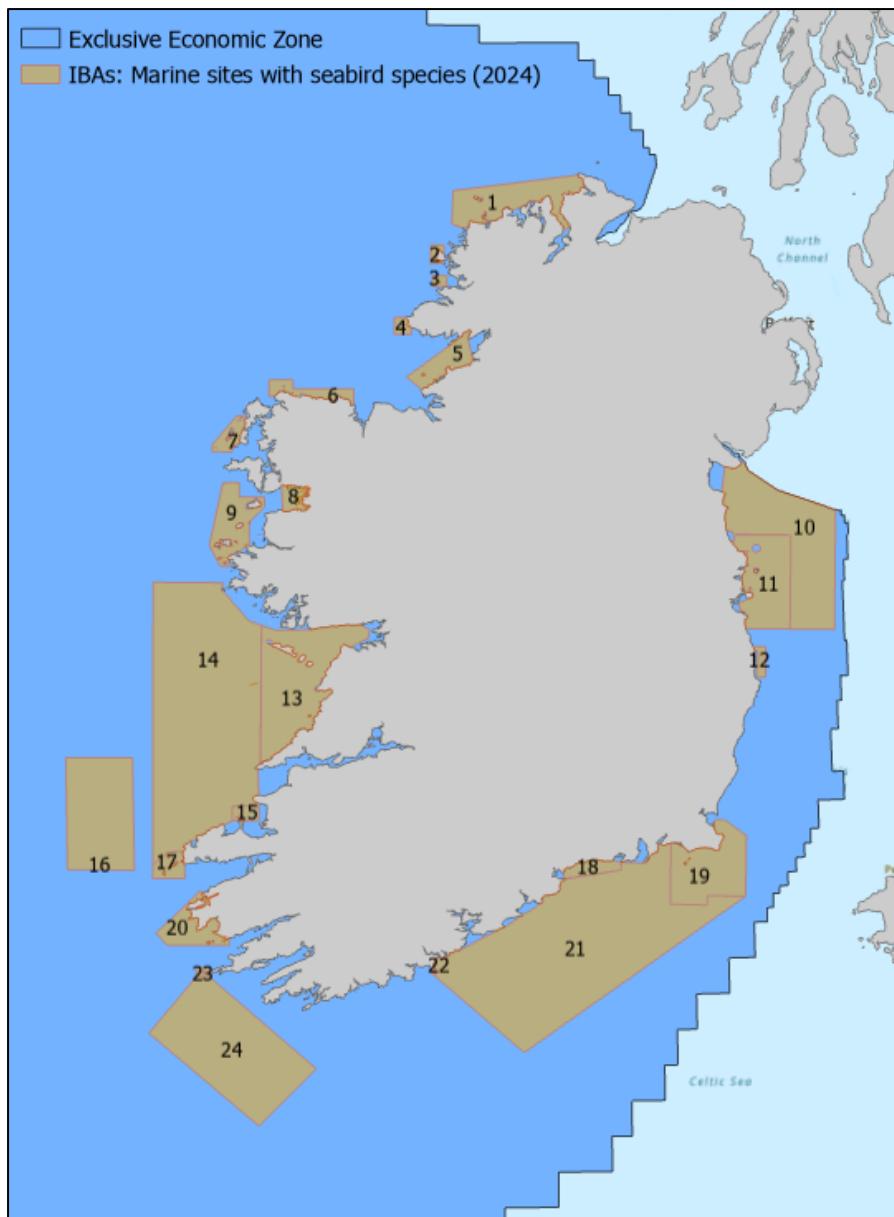


Figure 2 : 49 breeding colony Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas for seabirds in Ireland
(boxed numbers are new sites)

