

The Natural and Cultural Heritage of 'An Trá', Inis Oírr.

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An Trá, Inis Oírr

Inis Oírr is the smallest of the Aran Islands and lies approximately 10km from the County Clare coast. The island's main magnificent beach, An Trá, lies at the North of the island and has fine white sands and clear blue seas. The entire island is of considerable interest in terms of its biodiversity, archaeology and cultural interests.



White sands and clear blue water of An Trá, Inis Oírr.

Geology and landscape of Inis Oírr

Inis Oírr Island is a geological extension of the karstic Carboniferous region of the Burren. The characteristic thin soils support species-rich calcareous grassland interspersed with limestone pavement. The island is a mosaic of small fields supporting important habitats which are conserved and maintained by the extensive farming practices of the island.



Low intensity cattle rearing is the main farming enterprise of the island and is necessary to maintain the biodiversity of the species-rich grasslands of the island.



O'Brien's Castle and Dún Formna surrounded by the characteristic mosaic of walled fields to be seen throughout the island

Inisheer Island SAC Site code 001275

An Trá is adjacent to the Inisheer Island Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (site code. 001275) which covers approximately 75% of the island and has been designated on account of important habitats such as Coastal Lagoons (1150), Reefs (1170), Dry Heath (4030), Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland (6210), Lowland Hay Meadows (6510) and Limestone Pavement (8240) that are present on the island). More information on Inisheer Island SAC can be found at www.NPWS.ie



The boundary of Inisheer SAC highlighted in grey (www.heritagemaps.ie.)

Dune habitats at An Trá

The vegetation of the whole Aran Islands is incredibly species-rich and comprises almost half Ireland's total flora. Similarly the coastal flora at An Trá is equally diverse and rich in biodiversity within the dune habitats of mobile dunes and fixed dune vegetation. The mobile dunes are dominated by marram grass and form low-lying dunes along the length of the beach. On the landward side of the mobile dunes, fixed dune vegetation occurs in which marram is largely absent and the vegetation consists of a mix of grass, sedge and herb species.

The dune habitats at An Trá are dynamic and constantly changing with frequent events of in blown sand as well as sand removal during storm events. Storms and high tides regularly reach the toe of the dunes and in severe cases breach the dunes. The maintenance and conservation of the dune habitats is essential to maintain the coastal protection from severe storm events. The dune habitats are easily damaged by the creation of tracks which create bare sand areas through the dunes that are susceptible to erosion by the wind.

Common plant species within the fixed dune grassland are birds-foot-trefoil, ladies bedstraw and kidney vetch and these yellow flowered species provide a sea of yellow within the dune grasslands throughout the summer.



The dune habitats at An Trá consist of low marram dunes which are flanked by fixed dune grassland on the landward side.



The fixed dunes can be a sea of yellow in summer with birds-foot-trefoil and kidney vetch in full bloom.

The fixed dune grassland can also support many orchid species throughout the summer such as the bee orchid and the pyramidal orchid and the last orchid of the summer lady's tresses orchid.



Bee orchid can be seen in June, pyramidal orchid in July and lady's tresses orchid in August

Along with the diverse flora of the islands, butterflies and day flying moths are also plentiful. Butterflies such as the small blue butterfly, whose food plant is the kidney vetch, and the common blue butterfly that feeds on birds-foot-trefoil, can be spotted in the coastal grasslands in early and late summer.



The common blue butterfly whose caterpillar feeds on birds-foot-trefoil

Distinctive black and red coloured day-flying moths such as the cinnabar moth and six-spot burnet moth and their equally distinctive caterpillars can be spotted amongst the coastal vegetation.



Caterpillars of the day flying cinnabar moth



The six-spot burnet moth

The coastal habitats around the island are also home to a number of important bird species such as chough, which are members of the crow family and make their nest on sea cliffs. Tern species such as arctic, little and sandwich terns also nest here occasionally. The arctic tern over winters in South Africa and as far south as Antarctica and is summer visitor here from March to September. Little Terns are rare summer visitors from April to late August and nest colonially on the ground on shingle beaches, making them very vulnerable to poor weather and disturbance. Sandwich terns are summer visitors from March to September and over winter in Southern Europe and Africa. Farmland bird species such as the skylark, wheat ear and stonechat can be seen regularly in the coastal fields and throughout the island.

Seabirds such gannets, great northern divers, common guillemots, black guillemots, razor bills and puffins can be seen at sea from the coastline of the island.

The mammal fauna of the islands is not as diverse as the plants, insect or birds; however, there is a colony of grey seals on the island that can be seen sun bathing at low tide on the west coast of the island.

Occasionally, the elusive otter may also be seen foraging among the rock pools along the islands coastline at low tide.

Cultural Heritage of the Island close to An Trá

Cnoc Raithní

Cnoc Raithní ‘the hill of ferns’ is a bronze age burial ground overlooking An Trá at Inis Oírr. The Circular mound has several stone settings in which may be pre-Christian graves. It is possible that Cnoc Raithní is a complex multi-period structure, a pre-historic site re-used at a later date (Waddell 1994).

Teampall Chaomháin

Originally built on a low flat knoll, Teampall Chaomháin and has been covered with blown sand over the years so that it now appears to be submerged in the sand. The church is surrounded by a number of graves, among which lies the saint's bed or grave, and is marked by a fine cross-inscribed slab now protected by a small building (Waddell 1994). St Caomhán is the patron saint of Inis Oírr and his feast day is on the 14th June.



Teampall Chaomháin

Other cultural heritage sites on the island include: O'Brien's castle and Dún Formna, Tobar Éinne and Cill Gobnait. More information on the many archaeological sites on Inis Oírr can be found on www.heritagemaps.ie.



O'Brien's Castle built within Dún Formna on the highest part of the island



Cill Gobnait

References

Wadell, J.(1994). The archaeology of Aran, In: The Book of Aran. The Aran Islands, Co. Galway. J. Waddell, J.W.O'Connell, A.Korff (Eds). Tír Eolas.