

THE MAIDENS

A SPECIAL PLACE...



A view over The Maidens

The Maidens, islands off the eastern coast of Co. Antrim, have been declared as an ASSI because of its breeding colony of European Shag, Grey and Common Seal populations and the range of intertidal rock communities.

The European Shag is principally a marine species, very rarely appearing inland. In summer its blackish body plumage shows a green sheen, the dark wings a purple gloss and a distinctive up-curved crest adorns the forehead.

European Shags are usually colonial nesting. Numbers at an individual colony can significantly vary. Their breeding season is long, however in some years many adults may choose not to breed. They nest under boulders and within some of the disused buildings on one of the large islands.

The Shag is Amber-listed in the Irish Birds of Conservation Concern as its breeding population has undergone a moderate decline in the past 25 years. The Northern Ireland breeding

population is presently about 300 pairs, almost entirely along the rocky coasts and offshore islands of County Antrim. The Maidens holds a nationally important population of almost 100 pairs these birds.



European Shag

SITES OF BIOLOGICAL AND EARTH SCIENCE IMPORTANCE HAVE BEEN SURVEYED BY NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY TO ASSESS THEIR SCIENTIFIC INTEREST. THE BEST SITES ARE NOW BEING DECLARED AS AREAS OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (ASSIs). IN DOING SO WE AIM TO SAFEGUARD THESE IMPORTANT SITES FOR THE BENEFIT OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

The Maidens is an important haul-out area for Grey and Common Seals. Pups of both species have also been recorded. The plant communities are influenced by several factors, including exposure to salt spray, soil depth, aspect, slope, and input of natural fertiliser from breeding sea-birds.



Grey Seal

Correct management is essential for special places like The Maidens. In particular, it is essential that the integrity of the nesting habitat is maintained and disturbance to breeding birds and seals minimised. Northern Ireland Environment Agency is keen to work closely with the landowner to maintain and enhance The Maidens ASSI.