

The Natura 2000 network

Natura 2000 is a network of areas designated to protect threatened species and habitats throughout the European Union (EU). It is the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world, extending across all 27 EU member states, both on land and at sea (Source: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/biodiversity/natura-2000/the-natura-2000-protected-areas-network>). In August 2022, the Natura 2000 network comprised 27,031 sites (Source: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e516153c-2e59-11ed-975d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> page 8). All of these sites may be accessed via the Natura 2000 Viewer at <https://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/>.

In 1979, the Birds Directive (as amended in 2009) established an EU-wide protection regime for all bird species naturally occurring in the EU. It included classification by member states of **Special Protection Areas** (SPAs) for 194 particularly threatened bird species and for all migratory birds.

This approach was extended through the 1992 Habitats Directive, which also provided for the establishment of a representative system throughout the EU of legally protected habitats (places) and species other than birds. These areas are named Sites of Community Importance (SCIs) and aim for the conservation of the 233 habitat types listed in Annex I of the Directive and the 900 plus species listed in Annex II of that Directive. Member states identify SCIs and designate them as **Special Areas of Conservation** (SACs).



SPAs under the Birds Directive and SACs under the Habitats Directive together make up the Natura 2000 network.

The target of both directives, specifically set out within the Habitats Directive and echoed in the Birds Directive, is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the habitats and species they have been set up to protect.

Natura 2000 sites in Ireland

The requirement under the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive to designate Natura 2000 sites is transposed into Irish legislation by Part XAB, Section 177U of the *Planning and Development Act, 2000 S I No 30/2000* as amended, and Regulation 42 of the *European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011*. Natura 2000 sites are known in Irish legislation as 'European sites'.

Of the 27,031 Natura 2000 sites in the European Union, 604 of them are in the Republic of Ireland (IE) covering an area of 19,480km² or 13% of the country's land area (*Natura 2000 Barometer*, No 52, August 2022).

All 604 Natura 2000 sites found in Ireland are detailed on the website of the government's National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) at <https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites> together with the sites' qualifying interests, site descriptions, site documents, legislation, etc. The NPWS Designations Viewer at <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/edf34d92e28040fd87d3d14f55d8d95f> has maps, aerial photographs, etc., of all the sites.

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