

# National Tourism and Environmental Monitoring Programme

## Ards Forest Park 2025



**Fáilte  
Ireland**

Turasóireacht Náisiúnta  
An tÚdara Eorbartha  
National Tourism  
Development Authority

# National Tourism and Environmental Monitoring Programme

## Report for Ards Forest Park 2025

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## ARDS FOREST PARK – INTERESTING FINDS

### Interesting Finds

The oldest and largest Sitka Spruce in the forest, 'the Old Cashellilly Tree', was planted in the forest in the 1940s. It was saved from felling in 2005 and is dedicated to those who planted the first trees at the site after the estate was taken over by the Irish Land Commission in 1927.



### Features of the Site

- Parking, including disabled parking, is available at two locations.
- Signage throughout the site indicating the trail routes and informative signage relating to saltmarsh habitat.
- Toilet facilities are available at the car park.
- There is a playground to the north of the car park, with benches and picnic tables nearby.
- Tea, coffee and snacks are available at the 'Ards Coffee Tree' in the car park.
- A boardwalk is present that leads along the coast through the dunes.
- Life buoys are present on the beaches in the site.

### Habitats

- Moderately exposed rocky shores (LR2)
- Sand shores (LS2)
- Buildings and artificial surfaces (BL3)
- Amenity grassland (improved) (GA2)
- Dense bracken (HD1)
- (Mixed) broadleaved woodland (WD1)
- Mixed broadleaved/conifer woodland (WD2)
- (Mixed) conifer woodland (WD3)
- Conifer plantation (WD4)
- Oak-birch-holly woodland (WN1)
- Recently-felled woodland (WS5)
- Mesotrophic lakes (FL4)
- Embryonic dune (CD1)
- Marram dune (CD2)
- Fixed dune (CD3)

### Key Recommendations

- The removal of invasive species should be considered to improve the condition of the habitats in the park.
- The extension of the boardwalk would reduce the damage to the dunes caused by trampling.
- The provision of signage relating to the presence of ticks should be considered.
- Fencing should be considered around the abandoned building to the east of Lough Lilly or alternatively the exposed roof should be boarded up to restrict visitor access to the inside.
- The removal or repair of the damaged car door in the playground should be considered to ensure no risk is posed to children playing in the area.
- maintenance of the gravel pathways to the east of the main car park should be considered.
- The provision of segregated rubbish bins should be considered, particularly around the playground and seating areas.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Roughan & O'Donovan (ROD) was appointed by Fáilte Ireland to conduct Visitor and Environmental Surveys as part of the National Environmental Surveying & Monitoring Programme. Fáilte Ireland regularly engages with environmental research that is used to make informed management decisions and produce robust guidelines to facilitate the protection of the environment. From its inception in 2014, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) Operational Monitoring Programme has been conducting research into the impacts of tourism on the receiving environment.

Building on the success of the WAW environmental monitoring programme which ran from 2015-2019, Fáilte Ireland expanded the programme to a national level. From 2021 to 2022 the programme monitored 19 individual sites located in all of Fáilte Ireland's regional areas: The Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, Ireland's Ancient East, and Dublin. This 2025 National Monitoring report builds on environmental surveying and monitoring undertaken on behalf of Fáilte Ireland as far back as 2015 and to date (excluding the 2025 data), the surveys have monitored a total of 70 sites and recorded the activities and effects of over 31,000 visitors at a range of popular sites, including inland, urban, coastal and WAW discovery points.

The environmental surveys and monitoring in 2023 followed the methodologies used in previous years. Following the completion of the 2023 surveys, a review of the methodology was undertaken. In developing the survey methodology used in 2024 and 2025, ROD considered the methodology for gathering the data, the presentation of the data, and the usefulness of the data gathered. The review also considered the time required to gather the data.

Eight sites were surveyed in 2025. Figure 1.1 below shows the locations of these sites. This report is for Ards Forest Park, Co. Donegal.



Figure 1.1 Environmental Monitoring Programme 2025 locations. Basemap provided by Google.

## 1.2 Aim of the Report

The purpose of the monitoring programme is as follows:

- To gain insight from an environmental perspective at amenity and recreation sites across Ireland;
- To obtain data on path and trail conditions etc. for each site;
- To obtain data relating to habitats, flora, and fauna for each site;
- To identify observable trends or variations among the sites;
- To make recommendations where appropriate for site management for the benefit of the site, the visitor, and the natural environment.

## 1.1 Site Description of Ards Forest Park

Ards Forest Park is a scenic 480-hectare park on the shores of Sheephaven Bay in north Donegal, 5km southeast of Dunfanaghy town. The park is accessible by the N56 and extends all along the headland to Ard Point. The area being surveyed for this report (“the site”) is the northern side of the headland, from the small car park next to Lilly Lough, to the peninsula north of Sladdanore Lough. The site boundary is presented in Figure 1.2 below. A map showing the features of the site that are references in this report is presented in Figure 3.5.

There are 9 marked trails in the park which pass through a range of habitats and provide scenic views of the coast and the forest. Archaeological features such as raths, a holy well, and a mass rock are present within the site. Seven of the trails pass through the main car park which is located in the centre of the park, where there are a number of facilities including a coffee shop, picnic benches, informative signage, a playground and a toilet facility. A second smaller car park is located at the beginning of the Saltmarsh Trail on the western extent of the site boundary.

The site is a popular tourist attraction, drawing in 87,000 visitors in 2024 and making it the tenth most visited Coillte Park in 2024. The Donegal County Development Plan (2024-2030) assigns the site as an area of especially high scenic amenity.

The site is within the Sheephaven Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Sheephaven proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA). The site is 400m south of the Horn Head to Fanad Head Special Protection Area (SPA) and 2km southeast of Sessiagh Lough SAC and Sessiagh pNHA.



**Figure 1.2** Site boundary outlined in red. Basemap provided by Bing.

## 1.2 Critical Infrastructure

Table 1.1 to Table 1.3 below provide information on the infrastructure at Ards Forest Park. Uisce Éireann’s website was used to access information on the Water Supply and Wastewater Treatment Capacity Registers for County Donegal (Uisce Éireann 2025a, b).

**Table 1.1** Ards Forest Park Wastewater Infrastructure

Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP)	Uisce Éireann Indication of Capacity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Toilet facilities are available on this site beside the main car park.</li> <li>The nearest wastewater treatment plant is Creeslough WWTP.</li> </ul>	There is currently no spare capacity available at Creeslough WWTP.

**Table 1.2** Summary of Drinking Water Infrastructure at Ards Forest Park

Drinking Water	Water Resource Name (WRZ)	Uisce Éireann Indication of Capacity
The nearest service settlement to Ards Forest Park is Creeslough.	Creeslough Dunfanaghy	Capacity available

**Table 1.3 Summary of Transport Infrastructure at Ards Forest Park**

Nearest Settlement	Current Transport Infrastructure	Comment
Creeslough	Ards Forest Park is accessed by the N56. There are two car parks on site.	The site is not served by any public transport. The Mangan Tours bus provides the 965 from Letterkenny to Meenlaragh (Mín Lárach) and The Bus Feda Teoranta operates the 964 bus from Galway to Crolly (Croithlí). Both buses stop in Creeslough.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The following surveys were undertaken:

- Habitat survey
- Pathway condition survey
- Survey of the features, signage and hazards

The survey at Ards Forest Park was undertaken on the 21<sup>st</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2025. The weather conditions were clear with some light rain. The sub-sections below present the methodology used.

### 2.1 Habitat Conditions Assessment Methodology

The habitats within the site were classified and mapped in accordance with *A Guide to Habitats in Ireland* (Fossitt, 2000) and *Best Practice Guidance for Habitat Surveying and Mapping* (Smith et al. 2011). Notes were taken on species composition and habitat condition. Fossitt habitats corresponding to Annex I habitats were noted using the *Interpretation Manual of European Union Habitats* (EC, 2013). A desktop study was also undertaken to identify designated sites and rare and protected species in the vicinity of each site. Incidental sightings of birds, mammals, reptiles, etc. were also recorded during the site surveys.

The condition of the habitat in each polygon or line will were noted, including any damage and the likely cause of the damage. The areas along pathways are outlined by the pathway condition assessment in Section 2.2 below. The following criteria were used to assess habitat condition:

- Extent of habitat degradation;
- Impact of habitat degradation (localised or widespread);
- Potential for the habitat to recover; and
- Whether or not intervention is required.

### 2.2 Pathway Condition Assessment Methodology

The main pathways were defined during the site visit and a desk study which included a review of the Strava heat maps ([www.strava.com/heatmap](http://www.strava.com/heatmap)), and a review of the previous site monitoring reports, if available. Typically, the main paths are formalised waymarked trails or heavily trafficked pathways that are not formalised. These paths usually link the site entry points and car parks to a destination or feature of interest. The pathways were categorised into sections by type and composition. The different types of pathway are described in Table 2.1 below. Visitor Characterisation Surveys were undertaken by Fáilte Ireland and are presented in Appendix A. Each path section is described as 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' based on the condition of the path and whether or not it could accommodate the current levels of use. Indicators that a path was not suitable for the current levels of use included the presence of wet areas, erosion, trip hazards, damaged pavement, braiding, path widening and habitat loss along the path. Paths that generally facilitated unobstructed movement between locations were deemed as 'satisfactory'. It should be noted that the methodology outlined here is independent of and not linked to the trail registration and management process run by Sport Ireland Outdoors.

**Table 2.1 Pathway Types**

<b>Pathway Type</b>	<b>Description</b>
Paved Car Park	An area used for parking, wider than the road, that is paved, usually with tarmacadam.
Gravel Car Park	An area used for parking, wider than the road, that is gravel or crushed stone.
Paved Road	A road that is paved with tarmacadam or similar hard material.
Gravel Road	A road consisting of gravel or crushed stone, with no grass in the middle.
Gravel Track	A single vehicle pathway used by small numbers of vehicles. Tracks are normally paved with gravel and can have grass in the middle
Grassy Track	A single vehicle pathway used by small numbers of vehicles. These tracks are not paved and are used primarily by tractors, quads or small numbers of private vehicles.
Paved Path	A path is primarily for foot traffic. Paved paths are found in more developed areas, to cater for higher levels of traffic.
Gravel Path	A path is primarily for foot traffic and can be a single track or a track wide enough for several people to walk abreast. Gravel paths are found in more developed areas, to cater for higher levels of traffic.
Grassy Path	A path is primarily for foot traffic and can be a single track or a track wide enough for several people to walk abreast. Grassy paths are found in less developed areas, often beyond feature of interest, and are used less frequently.
Bare Ground Path	These paths occur where the vegetation had been eroded by foot traffic and is bare ground, or damages vegetation. These paths are often widespread on sites where formal waymarked trails are not provided.

### 2.3 Features, Signage and Hazards

Signage, features of interest, and hazards were recorded, photographed and mapped. Features includes built heritage, sculptures as well as the temporary toilets and bins. Hazards including unstable walls, broken fences or unprotected cliff tops.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Habitat Condition Assessment

Habitats were surveyed during the optimum habitat survey season i.e., April to September (Smith et al., 2011). Habitats were classified according to *A Guide to Habitats in Ireland* (Fossitt, 2000). Table 3.1 lists the habitats identified in Ards Forest Park along with their corresponding Annex I habitats. A habitat map is presented in Figure 3.1. It should be noted that having a corresponding Annex I habitat does not mean the Annex I habitat is automatically present.

**Table 3.1 Fossitt (2000) habitats and links to Annex I habitats.**

Fossitt 2000 Habitat	Corresponding Annex I habitats (Natura 2000 code)
(Mixed) broadleaved woodland (WD1)	None
Mixed broadleaved/conifer woodland (WD2)	None
(Mixed) conifer woodland (WD3)	None
Oak-birch-holly woodland (WN1)	Old sessile oak woods with Ilex and Blechnum in the British Isles (91A0)
Conifer plantation (WD4)	None
Fixed dune (CD3)	*Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation ("grey dunes") (2130) *Decalcified fixed dunes with <i>Empetrum nigrum</i> (2140) *Atlantic decalcified fixed dunes ( <i>Calluno-Ulicetea</i> ) (2150) Dunes with <i>Salix repens</i> ssp. <i>argentea</i> ( <i>Salicion arenariae</i> ) (2170)
Marram dune (CD2)	Shifting dunes along the shoreline with <i>Ammophila arenaria</i> ("white dunes") (2120)
Moderately exposed rocky shores (LR2)	Reefs (1170)
Mesotrophic lakes (FL4)	None
Dense bracken (HD1)	None
Sand shores (LS2)	Mudflats and sandflats not covered by sea water at low tide (1140) Annual vegetation of drift lines (1210)
Amenity grassland (improved) (GA2)	None
Recently felled woodland (WS5)	None
Buildings and artificial surfaces (BL3)	None
Embryonic dune (CD1)	Embryonic shifting dunes (2110)

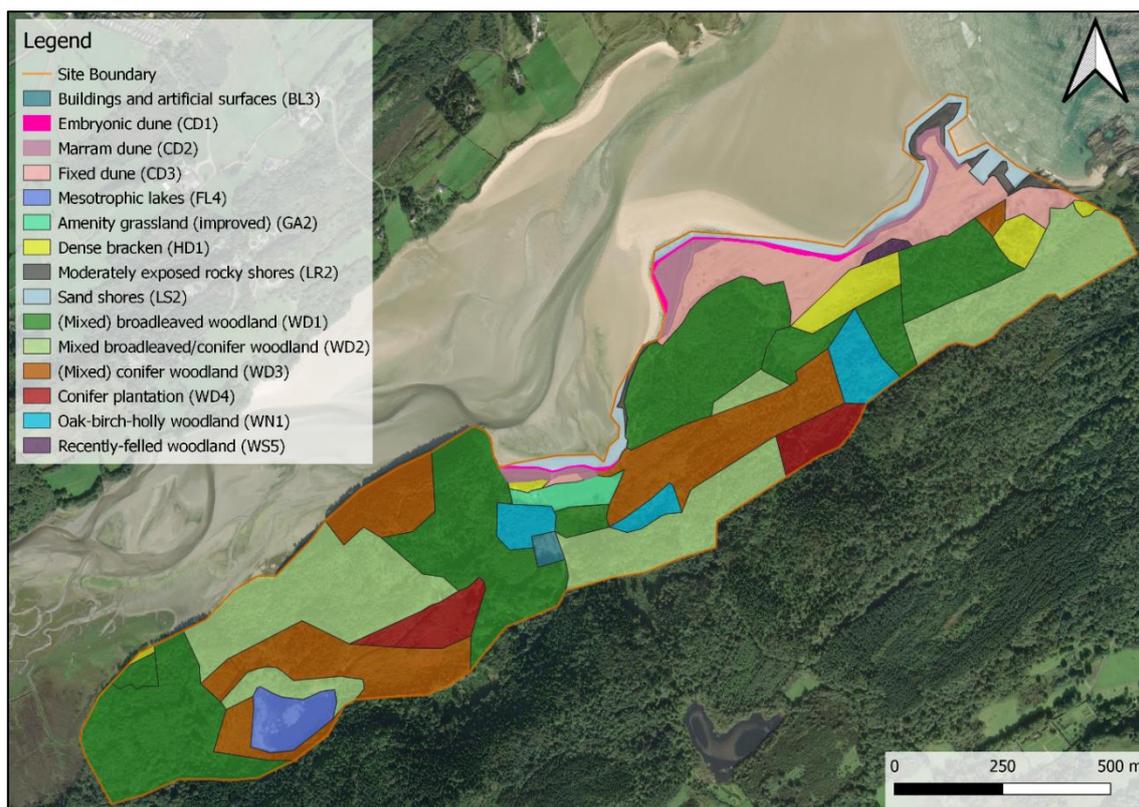


Figure 3.1 Habitat map of Ards Forest Park

### (Mixed) broadleaved woodland (WD1)

This habitat is found in several areas throughout Ards Forest Park. To the west of Lough Lilly, this habitat is largely comprised of beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), with birch (*Betula* spp), sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) and holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), as well as some areas containing sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*). The understorey is comprised of nettles (*Urtica dioica*), common lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), enchanters' nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*) and yellow pimpernel (*Lysimachia nemorum*). Dense stands of rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) were recorded lining most of the woodland pathways and in some areas, it extends into the woodland. Cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) was also recorded. Small patches of rhododendron are being treated in four areas of this habitat. Where these invasive species are present, they shade out the understorey and prevent the regeneration of trees.

To the west of the main car park, areas of WD1 are largely populated by pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) and downy birch (*Betula pubescens*), with hazel, ash, holly and sitka spruce recorded alongside them.



**Plate 3.1** (Mixed) broadleaf woodland (WD1) and a gravel pathway.

### **Mixed broadleaved/conifer woodland (WD2)**

This habitat is found in several areas throughout Ards Forest Park. Where this habitat is found along the coast is comprised of a mix of lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) and some European larch (*Larix decidua*), along with the broadleaved species pedunculate oak, beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), birch and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The understorey is comprised of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), enchanters nightshade, great wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*), herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), bramble and nettles.

Further from the coast, the species comprising this habitat consist of the conifers Scot's pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Lawson's cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*), noble fir (*Abies procera*) and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) and the broadleaved species pedunculate oak, ash, beech, sycamore, alder and birch.

Dense stands of rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) were recorded lining most of the woodland pathways and in some areas, it extends into the woodland. Small patches of rhododendron are being treated in four areas of this habitat. Where these invasive species are present, they shade out the understorey and prevent the regeneration of trees.

### **(Mixed) conifer woodland (WD3)**

This habitat is found in several areas throughout Ards Forest Park. The coniferous species recorded in these areas consisted of a mix of sitka spruce, western hemlock, Lawson's cypress and noble fir. Lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) and European larch (*Larix decidua*) were recorded along the coast to the south of the main car park. The broadleaved species noted above are present in this habitat, however, coniferous species are dominant.

Dense stands of rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) were recorded lining most of the woodland pathways and in some areas, it extends into the woodland. Small patches of rhododendron are being treated in four areas of this habitat. Where these invasive species are present, they shade out the understorey and prevent the regeneration of trees.



**Plate 3.2** Dense Rhododendron growth in the woodland adjacent to the pathway to the east of Lough Lilly

#### **Oak-birch-holly woodland (WN1)**

This habitat is found to the north of the main car park and in two areas in the eastern section of the park. This habitat is dominated by sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) and downy birch (*Betula pubescens*). Holly, beech and alder are also present. The ground flora consists of bracken, great wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), enchanters' nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*), meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), ferns and mosses. Small patches of Rhododendron are present in this woodland. This habitat is an example of the Annex I habitat *Old sessile oak woods with Ilex and Blechnum in the British Isles* [91A0].

#### **Conifer plantation (WD4)**

Dense sitka spruce plantations are present in the southern part of the site on both the east and west of the site car park.

#### **Dune habitats (CD1, CD2, CD3)**

Fixed dunes (CD3) is the dominant dune habitat on this site, and is present along the coast on the northern part of the site. Marram (CD2) and embryonic dunes (CD1) are present in narrow stretches along the shoreline. Species recorded were marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*), harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), bent (*Agrostis* spp.), ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), eyebright (*Euphrasia* spp.), lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*), sea plantain (*Plantago maritima*), mountain everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), pyramidal orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), red clover, Yorkshire fog (*Trifolium pratense*), bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), false oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*), wild thyme (*Thymus praecox*) and mosses.

Numerous informal paths are present in the dunes, particularly leading to and from the beaches, resulting in erosion and habitat loss. This is discussed further in section 3.2 below.



**Plate 3.3**            **Fixed dune habitat (CD3) with informal pathways recorded in the north of the site**

**Moderately exposed rocky shores (LR2)**

This habitat is present in some areas of the study area, acting as a transitional habitat between the dunes and the beach. No visitor impacts were noted on the rocks, likely due to them being difficult to traverse. Lichens, limpets and barnacles were recorded throughout this habitat. This habitat is shown above in 3.4.



**Plate 3.4** View of the site, showcasing Dense bracken (HD1) and (Mixed) broadleaved woodland (WD1) in the foreground. Fixed dunes (CD3), Moderately exposed rocky shores (LR1), Sandy shores (LS2) and Conifer woodland (WD3).

#### **Mesotrophic lakes (FL4)**

Lough Lilly is located near the southern extent of the site boundary. White and yellow water-lilies (*Nymphaea* & *Nuphar* spp.) and pondweeds (*Potamogeton* sp.) are present in the lake and a fringe of common reeds (*Phragmites australis*) are present along the shores of the lake.

#### **Dense bracken (HD1)**

This habitat is present on the northeast side of the site between the dunes and woodland habitats, and was also found at the north side of the playground, separating it from the marram dune. The habitat was dominated by bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and does not correspond to any Annex I habitats. A photo of dense bracken at Ards Forest is presented in Plate 3.5 below.



**Plate 3.5** Dense bracken habitat in the north of the site

### **Sand shores (LS2)**

This habitat is present on the northern shoreline of the site. Visitors were active on the beach at the time of the survey, particularly on the section of beach north of the playground. There were numerous paths leading from the shore into the dunes, which is negatively impacting this habitat, this is discussed further in Section 3.2 below.

### **Amenity grassland (improved) (GA2)**

To the north of the main car park, there is an area of mown amenity grassland with benches and a playground. Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), daisy (*Bellis perennis*) dandelion (*Taraxacum majus*), meadow buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*), ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), tansy ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*) and Yorkshire fog (*Holcus lanatus*) were among the species recorded here.

### **Recently-felled woodland (WD5)**

A recently felled section of European larch woodland is present where the northern part of the forest gives way to fixed dune habitat. Dense bracken is colonising this area.

### **Buildings and artificial surfaces (BL3)**

This habitat is present throughout the park in the form of roads, pathways and car parks. This habitat is not of biodiversity value.

## **3.2 Pathway Condition Assessment**

Figure 3.2 presents a Strava heat map for the site. Strava aggregates data from users on its app who opt-in to share their activities and locations. The pathway condition assessment map for the site east of the main car park is presented in Figure 3.3 below and the map for the site west of the main car park is presented in Figure 3.4 below.



Figure 3.2 Heat map of visitor movements in Ards Forest Park (Strava, 2025)

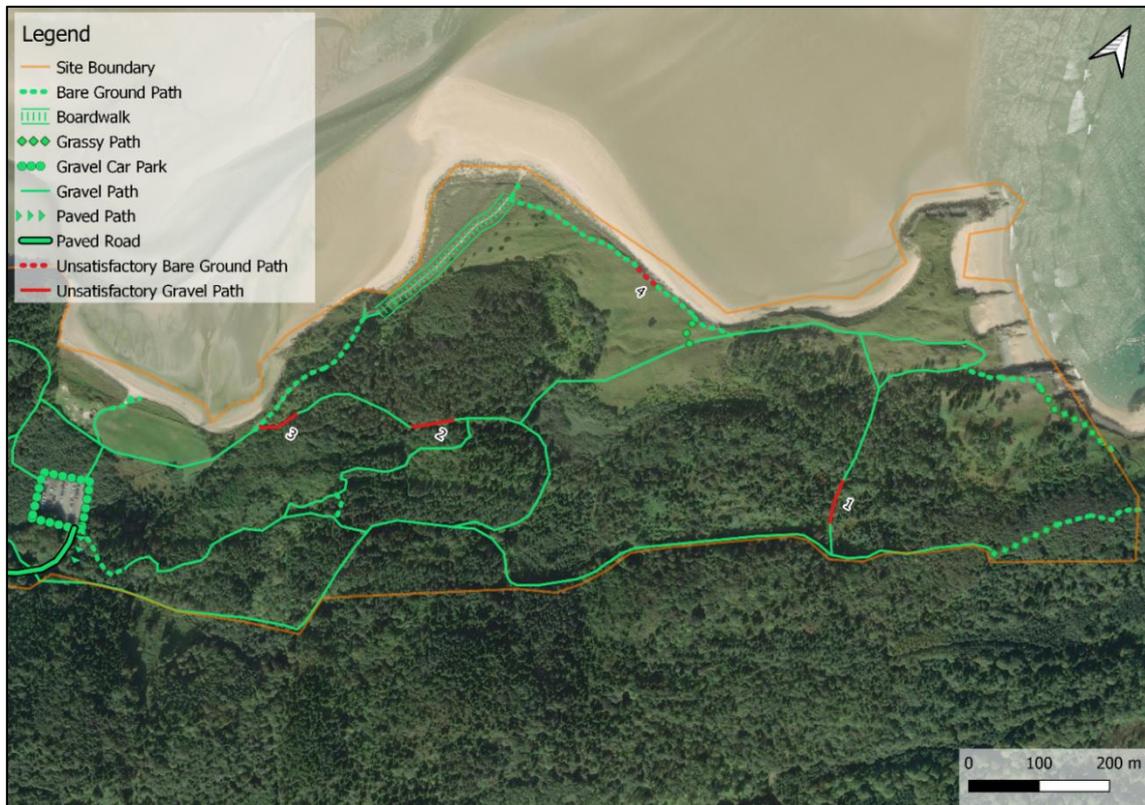
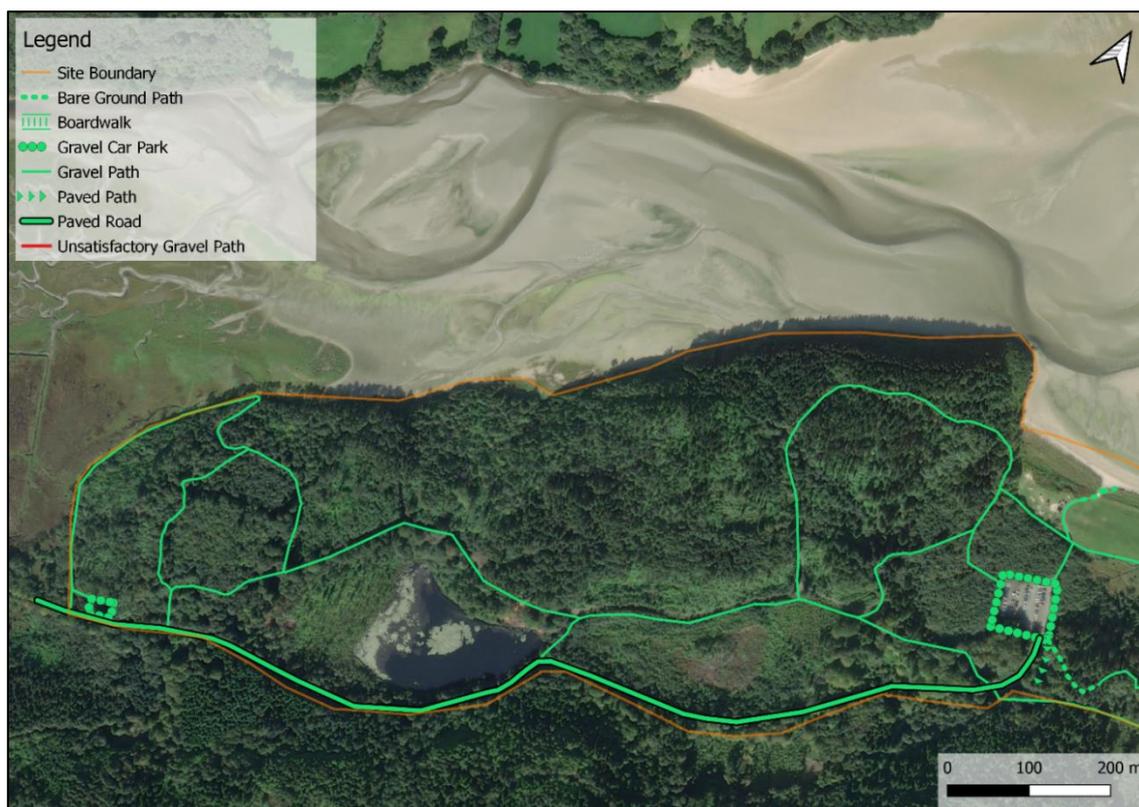


Figure 3.3 Pathway types and conditions presented in the eastern section of Ards Forest Park, with unsatisfactory pathways numbers 1-4.



**Figure 3.4** Pathway types and conditions presented in the western section of Ards Forest Park

Most pathways in Ards Forest Park were gravel pathways and were generally in good condition. Three small stretches of the gravel pathways were in unsatisfactory condition due to erosion (Figure 3.3, Areas 1, 2 & 3), as described below. Other pathways present within the site include two gravel car parks, a paved road, several bare ground paths in the woodland and dunes on the east half of the site and a wooden boardwalk along the coast to the north-east of the main car park. These pathways were in satisfactory condition, with the exception of a stretch of the bare ground pathway connecting the boardwalk to a gravel path to its east (Figure 3.3, Area 4), as described below.

In Ards Forest Park, a paved road leads from the N56 into a large gravel car park. A paved path leads from this car park to the toilet facilities 25m south of the car park. Another smaller gravel car park is located directly north of the paved road at the start of the study area. Both car parks and the paved road and path are in satisfactory condition.

A gravel path follows the southern border of the study area from the main car park in an eastern direction and loops back towards the playground and car park through the dunes. This pathway is in satisfactory condition, however, one gravel pathways connecting the north and south of this loop is in unsatisfactory condition due to erosion (labelled '1' in Figure 3.3 above). Erosion has formed a series of holes along another section of this gravel path (labelled '2' in Figure 3.3 above) which poses a trip hazard. The gravel in this section of path has been compacted into the ground. Another section of this gravel path, located approximately 170m east, is in unsatisfactory condition due to erosion (labelled '3' in Figure 3.3 above).



**Plate 3.5** Unsatisfactory gravel pathway adjacent to stone steps recorded in Ards Forest Park (labelled 1 in Figure 3.3 above).



**Plate 3.6** Unsatisfactory gravel pathway recorded in Ards Forest Park (labelled 2 in Figure 3.3 above).



**Plate 3.7** Unsatisfactory gravel pathway recorded in Ards Forest Park (labelled 3 in Figure 3.3 above).

A gravel path leads to a wooden boardwalk through the dunes to the northeast of the car park. The boardwalk terminates after 250m, from which point a bare ground path continues along the coast in an easterly direction through the dunes. A section of the dune along this bare path has crumbled away, causing some habitat loss and damage to the pathway (labelled 4 in Figure 3.3 above).



**Plate 3.8** Unsatisfactory bare ground pathway, between the boardwalk and gravel path, recorded in Ards Forest Park (labelled 4 in Figure 3.3 above).

Another gravel path leads west from the main car park past Lough Lilly and along the coast and saltmarsh to the second car park. This pathway was in good condition.

### 3.3 Features Signage and Hazards

#### 3.3.1 Features and Signage

Toilet facilities are available at the main car park and disabled parking is available in both car parks. An outlet selling coffee, tea, ice cream and snacks is located in the main car park with a covered seating area and an outdoor seating area. No bins were observed on site and several discarded dog waste bags were observed along the pathways. To the north of the main car park is a playground with swings, slides, climbing frames and a sandpit. Several benches and picnic tables are present in and to the east of the playground, there are two benches along the gravel path through the dunes, another bench in the woodland on the south of the study area and two benches near the north-east boundary of the site. Life buoys are present at the beaches on site, however, no life buoys were recorded beside Lough Lilly. Signage describing each of the trails is present at the car parks, and at the sand dunes and there are signs warning against campfires, camping, cycling and horse riding. The 'Saltmarsh Trail' features four signs along its length describing the habitat and the bird species that are present. The areas of saltmarsh are outside the study area boundary.

Rhododendron is present throughout the woodland and abundant along most woodland pathways. Four signs relating to the treatment of invasive species with an approved herbicide are present around the woodland, and small patches of Rhododendron were observed wilting.

The oldest Sitka Spruce in the forest, the Old Cashellilly Tree, is located along the path to the west of Lough Lilly and is indicated by a small sign that briefly describes its history. Various wood carvings are located adjacent to the pathways where tree stumps have been cut into the shapes of various animals, including owls, rabbits and boars. One bench to the east of the playground has armrests that are carved into the likeness of deer. Jeffrey's House is a structure with a timber frame thatched in flax that overlooks the beach and sand dunes near the beginning of the boardwalk.





**Plate 3.9** Some of the features recorded on site. Ards Coffee Tree (Top right), signage (top left), carved bench (middle left), public toilets (middle right), Jeffrey's House (bottom left) and wooden animal carving (bottom right).

### 3.3.2 Hazards

A replica of the Reliant Regal 3-wheeler from the television programme 'Only Fools and Horses' is present submerged in the ground to its undercarriage in the playground. The driver's side door is missing, allowing access to the vehicle. The passenger door is damaged above the door handle, presenting a sharpened edge. Visitors were observed warning their children to avoid touching the door.

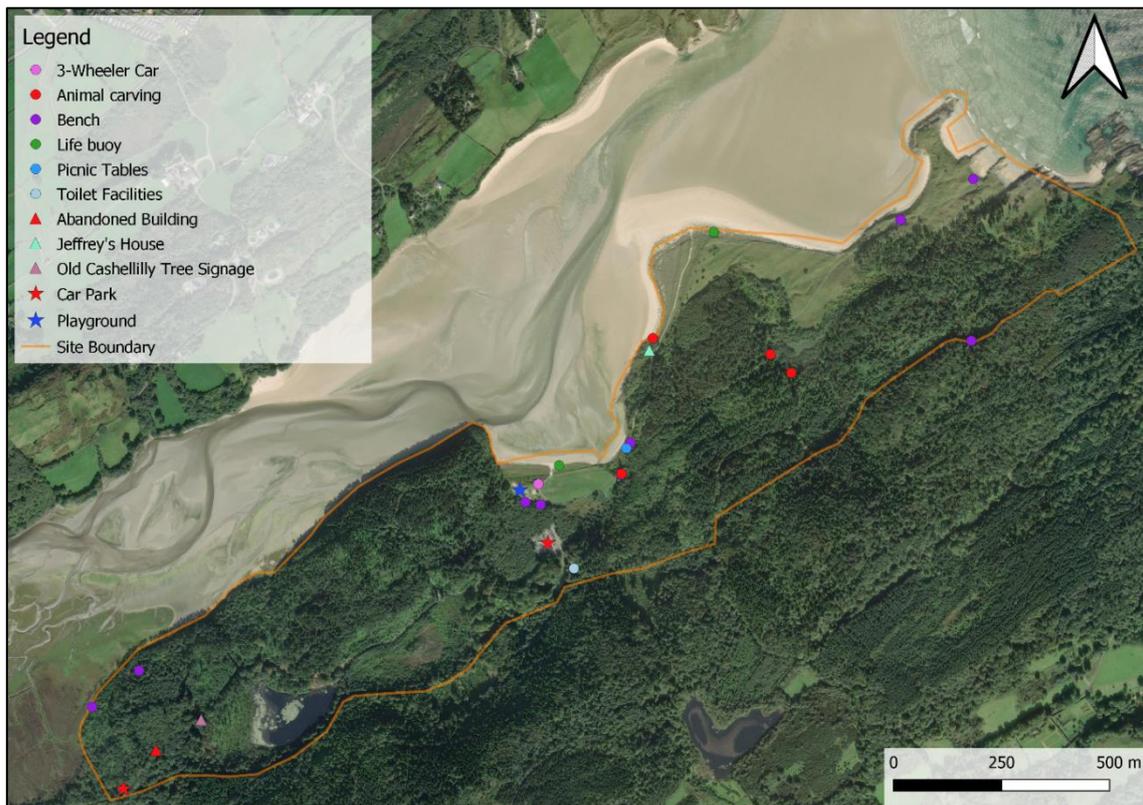
An old, abandoned cottage is present adjacent to the path to the west of Lough Lilly. The ground slopes up behind this cottage so that the back of the roof is at ground level. The slate roof has fallen away, exposing the wooden rafters and creates the risk of visitors falling into the building. The doors of the building are boarded shut which would make it difficult to exit the building.

The uneven nature of the informal paths through the dunes, with continuous deterioration, have become hazardous. The dune is eroding and collapsing along the informal trail between the boardwalk and the gravel path to its east, which has the potential to be a tripping or falling hazard.

Ticks were abundant throughout the site, particularly in areas where pathways or desire lines lead through areas of dense bracken. This poses a hazard due to the potential for the transmission of Lyme disease.



**Plate 3.10** Old building with missing slate roof (top right and left), Reliant Regal 3-wheeler with the damaged door (bottom left) and the eroding dune habitat (bottom right).



**Figure 3.11** The locations of the features at Ards Forest Park

### 3.4 Ecological Constraints

#### 3.4.1 Protected Sites

A desktop study was undertaken to identify designated sites and rare and protected species in the vicinity of the site. The site is within the Sheephaven SAC and the Sheephaven pNHA. The site is 400m South of the Horn Head to Fanad Head SPA and 2km southeast of Sessiagh Lough SAC and the Sessiagh Lough pNHA. Information on these sites was obtained from the NPWS website and the sites' respective Natura 2000 Standard Data Forms. These sites are described in Table 3.2 below.

**Table 3.2 Designated sites within 2 km of the Ards Forest Park site**

Site Name [Site Code]	Qualifying Interests	Distances (km) from Site	Pressures and Threats (those related to recreation are in bold)
<b>European Sites</b>			
Sheephaven SAC [001190]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide [1140]</li> <li>• Annual vegetation of drift lines [1210]</li> <li>• Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts [1230]</li> <li>• Salicornia and other annuals colonising mud and sand [1310]</li> <li>• Atlantic salt meadows (<i>Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritima</i>) [1330]</li> <li>• Mediterranean salt meadows (<i>Juncetalia maritimi</i>) [1410]</li> <li>• Embryonic shifting dunes [2110]</li> <li>• Shifting dunes along the shoreline with <i>Ammophila arenaria</i> (white dunes) [2120]</li> <li>• Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation (grey dunes) [2130]</li> <li>• Humid dune slacks [2190]</li> <li>• Machairs (* in Ireland) [21A0]</li> <li>• Old sessile oak woods with <i>Ilex</i> and <i>Blechnum</i> in the British Isles [91A0]</li> <li>• <i>Euphydryas aurinia</i> (Marsh Fritillary) [1065]</li> <li>• <i>Petalophyllum ralfsii</i> (Petalwort) [1395]</li> </ul>	Within the site boundary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stock feeding (M)</li> <li>• Forestry clearance (M)</li> <li>• <b>Outdoor sports and leisure activities, recreational activities (M)</b></li> <li>• <b>Motorised nautical sports (M)</b></li> <li>• <b>Golf Course (M)</b></li> </ul>
Horn Head to Fanad Head SPA [004194]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fulmar (<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>) [A009]</li> <li>• Cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>) [A017]</li> <li>• Shag (<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>) [A018]</li> </ul>	400m north of site boundary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Camping and caravans (M)</b></li> <li>• Erosion (M)</li> <li>• Fertilisation (M)</li> <li>• Modification of cultivation practices (M)</li> <li>• <b>Removal of beach materials (M)</b></li> </ul>

Site Name [Site Code]	Qualifying Interests	Distances (km) from Site	Pressures and Threats (those related to recreation are in bold)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barnacle Goose (<i>Branta leucopsis</i>) [A045]</li> <li>Peregrine (<i>Falco peregrinus</i>) [A103]</li> <li>Kittiwake (<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>) [A188]</li> <li>Guillemot (<i>Uria aalge</i>) [A199]</li> <li>Razorbill (<i>Alca torda</i>) [A200]</li> <li>Chough (<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>) [A346]</li> <li>Greenland White-fronted Goose (<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>) [A395]</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invasive non-native species (L)</li> <li><b>Motorised vehicles (L)</b></li> <li><b>Paths, tracks, cycling tracks (L)</b></li> <li>Restructuring agricultural land holding (L)</li> <li><b>Walking, horse-riding and non-motorised vehicles (L)</b></li> </ul>
Sessiagh Lough SAC [000185]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the Littorelletea uniflorae and/or Isoeto-Nanojuncetea [3130]</li> <li><i>Najas flexilis</i> (Slender Naiad) [1833]</li> </ul>	2km northwest of the site boundary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuous urbanisation (M)</li> <li>Diffuse groundwater pollution due to non-sewered population (M)</li> <li>Diffuse pollution to surface waters due to household sewage and waste waters (M)</li> <li>Invasive non-native species (M)</li> <li><b>Motorised nautical sports (L)</b></li> </ul>
<b>National Sites</b>			
Sheephaven pNHA [001190]	No site description available, refer to Sheephaven SAC above.	Within site boundary	No site description available. Refer to Sheephaven SAC above.
Sessiagh Lough pNHA [000185]	No site description available, refer to Sessiagh Lough SAC above.	2km northwest of the site boundary	No site description available. Refer to Sessiagh Lough SAC above.

### 3.4.2 Incidental Species Recorded

Ards Forest Park supports a range of habitats and species. Table 3.3 below presents the bird species recorded during the survey at Ards Forest Park, along with their Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCCI) status (2020–2026) (Gilbert et al., 2021).

**Table 3.3 Incidental Species Records & BoCCI Status**

Scientific Name	Common Name
<b>Red List</b>	
<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Sparrowhawk
<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Herring Gull
<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Black-headed Gull
<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Meadow pipit
<b>Amber List</b>	
<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Goldcrest
<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Oystercatcher
<i>Larus marinus</i>	Great Black-backed Gull
<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Robin
<b>Green List</b>	
<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Bullfinch
<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Heron
<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	Treecreeper
<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Wren

### 3.4.3 Records of Rare, Protected and Invasive Species

Records of rare, protected, and invasive species from the past ten years within 2km<sup>2</sup> of the site were obtained the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) online database (Grid References: C0835, C0734, C0735, C0634). These records are presented in Table 3.4 below.

**Table 3.4 Rare, protected, and invasive species recorded in the past decade from Hectads C0835, C0734, C0735, C0634 from NBDC database.**

Scientific name	Common Name	Date of last Record	Status*
<b>Marine Mammals</b>			
<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	Common Dolphin	05/02/2018	Annex IV HD; WA
<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	Striped Dolphin	05/10/2019	Annex IV HD; WA
<b>Birds</b>			
<i>Branta bernicla</i>	Brent Goose	19/12/2022	Amber List
<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Little Egret	19/12/2022	Annex I BD
<i>Falco columbarius</i>	Merlin	21/02/2023	Annex I BD; Amber List
<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Black-headed Gull	02/08/2022	Red List
<i>Anser anser</i>	Greylag Goose	31/03/2022	Amber List

Scientific name	Common Name	Date of last Record	Status*
<i>Uria aalge</i>	Common Guillemot	30/03/2023	Amber List
<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	Greenshank	29/11/2021	Amber List
<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Oystercatcher	18/05/2020	Amber List
<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Ringed Plover	03/07/2020	Amber List
<b>Terrestrial Mammals</b>			
<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Red Deer	31/08/2015	WA
<b>Insects</b>			
<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>	Marsh Fritillary	02/06/2023	Annex II HD
<i>Cupido minimus</i>	Small Blue	02/06/2023	Threatened Species: Endangered
<b>Flowering Plants</b>			
<i>Pseudorchis albida</i>	Small-white Orchid	20/06/2020	Flora Protection Order; Threatened Species: Endangered

\*Abbreviations: Annex II/IV/V (non-avian species) = Habitats Directive (HD); Annex I, II, III = Birds Directive (BD); Red/Amber List = Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026 (BOCCI) (Gilbert et al., 2021); WA: Wildlife Act 1976 (as amended).

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information collected during the field survey and desk study, the following recommendations are made:

- The presence of invasive plant species was of note, with Rhododendron present along most of the woodland pathways. Cherry laurel is also present in the woodlands. While small areas of Rhododendron are being treated with herbicide, the extensive growth of this species would require more extensive treatment to effectively deal with the issue. Fáilte Ireland should continue to support initiatives that aim to treat Rhododendron in Ards Forest, and engage with Coillte, Donegal County Council and any local conservation groups.
- Numerous informal pathways are present in the dunes. A formal pathway and a boardwalk are already present, however, there is no formal path connecting them. An extension of the boardwalk to discourage visitors from using the informal paths through the dunes, which is causing the dunes to collapse onto the beach, is recommended. The potential use of way markers and signage to keep visitors on track should be considered to reduce the number of informal trails in the dunes.
- The installation of further signage should be considered to inform visitors about ticks with recommendations to stay on pathways and how to prevent and treat tick bites. Where signage is being implemented, teleological signage (signage with instruction and justification for the instruction) should be used.
- The slate roof of an abandoned cottage has fallen away and due to the sloping ground behind the cottage, the exposed roof is at ground level creating a hazard for visitors. Measures to make this structure safe should be considered e.g. fencing around the house or alternatively the roof could be repaired.
- The removal or repair of the damaged car door in the playground should be considered to ensure the damaged edge poses no risk to children playing in the area.
- It is recommended that trail improvement and repair works are carried out on the unsatisfactory pathways to the east of the car park, where erosion has damaged the paths.
- There are no rubbish bins available on site. The provision of segregated rubbish bins, including dog waste bins should be considered.

## 5. REFERENCES

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# **APPENDIX A**

## **FÁILTE IRELAND VISITOR CHARACTERISATION SURVEYS**



**Ards Forest Park – Visitor Monitoring Assessment**

**August 2025**

## **Contents**

- **1.0 Introduction:**
- **2.0 Visitor Characterisation Survey Methodology:**
- **3.0 Results:**
  - **Prevalence of Group Type**
  - **Prevalence of Transport Type**
  - **Activity Levels**
- **4.0 Observations**

**Appendix 1 – Activity & Impact Codes**

## **1.0 Introduction:**

### **Background**

Fáilte Ireland regularly engages with environmental research that is used to make informed management decisions and produce robust guidelines to facilitate the protection of the environment. From its inception in 2014, the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) Operational Monitoring Programme has been conducting research into the impacts of tourism on the receiving environment.

Building on the success of the WAW environmental monitoring programme which ran from 2015-2019, Fáilte Ireland expanded the programme to a national level. From 2021 to 2022 the programme monitored 19 individual sites located in all of Fáilte Ireland's regional areas: The Wild Atlantic Way, Irelands Hidden Heartlands, Ireland's Ancient East, and Dublin. The environmental monitoring builds on environmental surveying and monitoring undertaken on behalf of Fáilte Ireland as far back as 2015, and to date (excluding the 2025 data), the surveys have monitored a total of 70 sites and recorded the activities and effects of over 31,000 visitors at a range of tourism sites (including inland, urban, coastal and WAW discovery points).

### **2.0 Visitor Characterisation Survey Methodology:**

- Visitor Characterisation Surveys

The visitor characterisation survey was undertaken by the Fáilte Ireland Wild Atlantic Way team at Ards Forest Park, Co. Donegal to supplement and be appended to the National Environmental Monitoring Programme 2025 Report undertaken by Roughan O'Donovan Consulting Engineers. The survey was undertaken on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2025 from 2.00-4.00pm on a dry and sunny afternoon.

For the purposes of this assessment a 'visitor' refers to an individual, couple or group who arrive together. The following variables were recorded for each visitor:

- Activity Type
- Group Type
- Transport Type
- Activity Levels; and
- Impact Severity Levels.

### **3.0 Results:**

#### **3.1 Visitor Characterization Survey:**

The visitor monitoring survey undertaken on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2025 from 2.00-4.00pm on a dry and sunny afternoon.. A total of 38 No. visitor groups comprising 147 No. Individuals were recorded. This site during the survey period was most popular amongst the 'family' group followed by a distance by the 'couple' and 'family with elderly' groups. Activities undertaken by groups during the survey comprised generally walking on paths, hard trails or marked surfaces, playing in the playground and sitting and picnicking.

### 3.2 Prevalence of Group Type

Figure 1 presents the prevalence of group types observed visiting the site 'family' made up the largest proportion of group type with 32% of visitor groups observed. The second largest group type was 'couple' at 19% with 'family with elderly' and 'mixed small group' 11% and 10% respectively. The remaining group types observed in order of prevalence were 'elderly couple', 'individual' and 'mixed large group'. The largest group observed with dogs were the 'Couple' group. 80% of groups observed with dogs were observed having them 'on lead'.

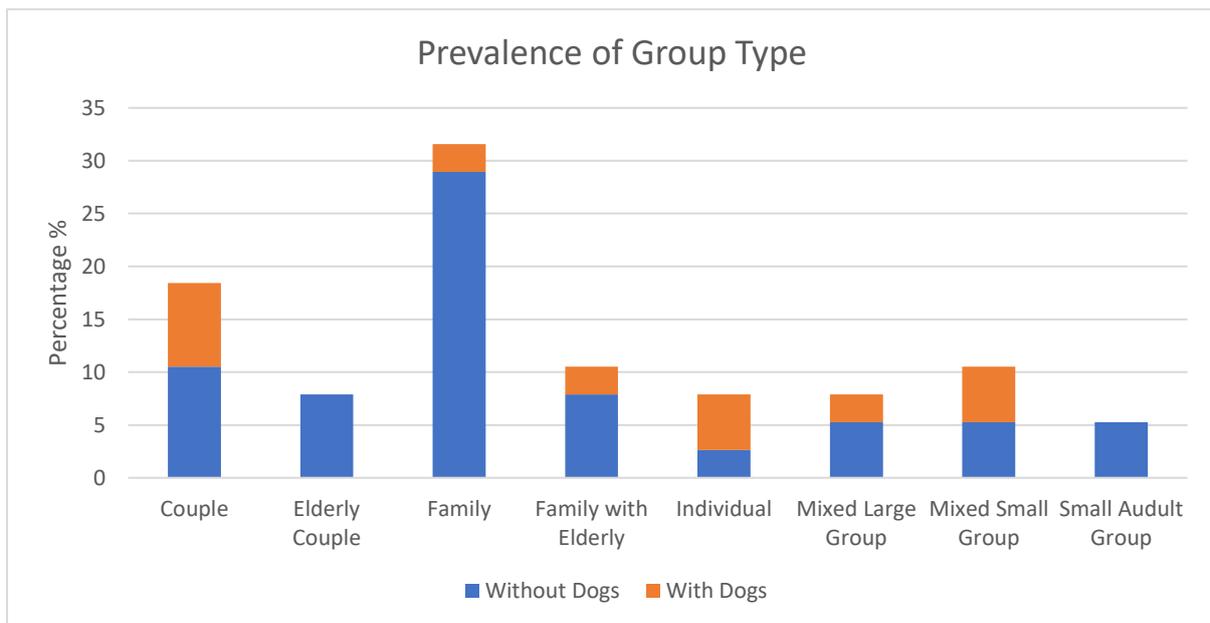


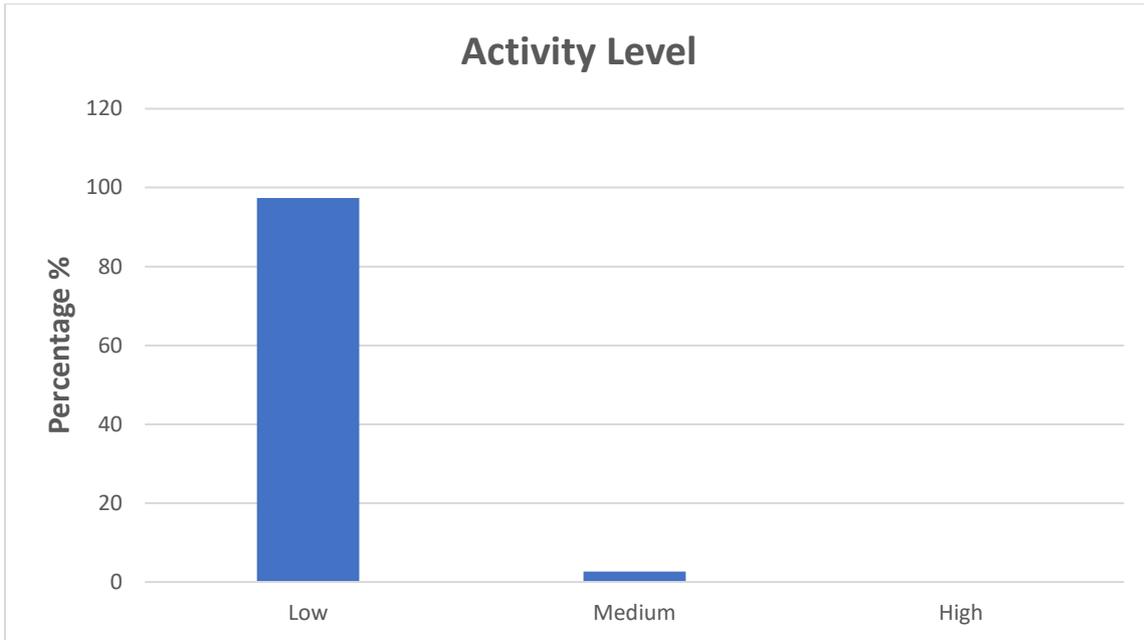
Figure 1: Prevalence of Group Type

### 3.3 Prevalence of Transport Type

The car was the main mode of transport observed, accounting for 97% of visitor groups observed visiting the site by car. This was followed by foot with 3% (one number group).

### 3.4 Activity Levels

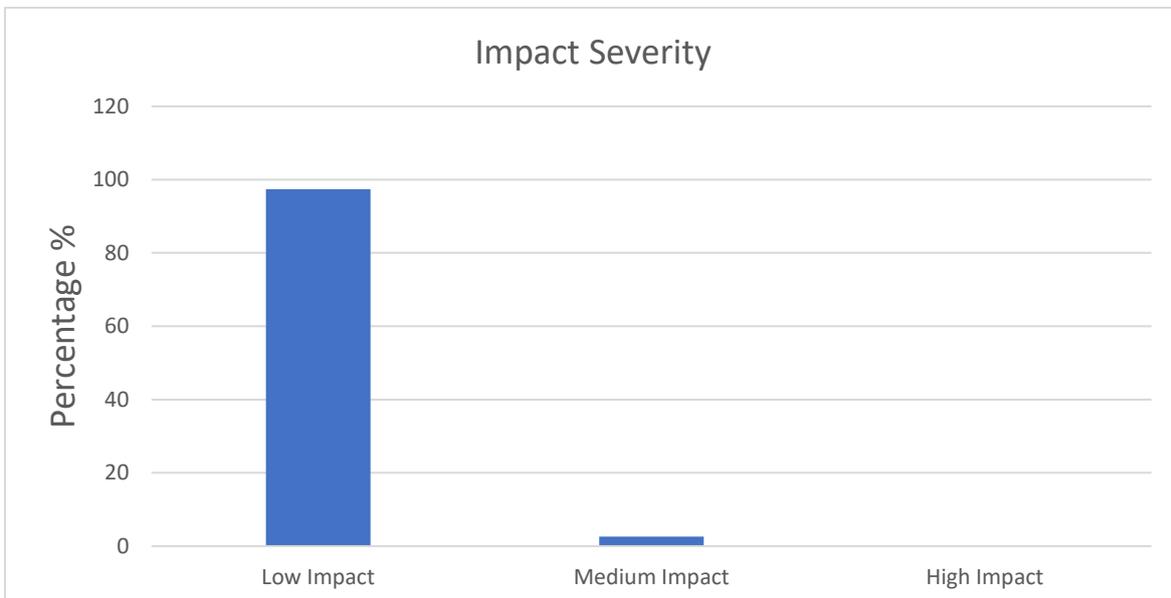
Figure 2 below presents the activity levels at Ards Forest Park. A sample of 38 visitor groups' activities were observed. The results from this are shown below in Figure 3. Activity categories are detailed in Appendix I. Activities such as Walking, running or playing on level sands is a low-level activity, whereas disturbing wildlife and picking herbaceous vegetation are considered high level activities. 97% of the activities observed at Ards Forest Park were considered low level activities with the remaining 3% (medium impact activity levels) comprising cycling electric bikes through the forest away from any marked trail.



**Figure 2: Activity Level**

### 3.5 Impact Severity Levels

Figure 3 presents the impact severity level observed at the site. A sample of 38 visitor groups' activities were observed. Impact severity level relates to the damage of an activity on the site. The levels of impact severity are detailed in Appendix I. Similar to the impact type above, the survey found that 97% of the activities observed had low level impact severity on the site. Low level includes no effects, desire lines on grassy and leafy vegetation and temporary disturbance of wildlife.



**Figure 3: Impact Severity Levels**

## **4.0 Observations**

The toilet facilities were clean and well used.

Families were observed using the section of beach beside the playpark. With no clear marked pathway to the beach, families followed a variety of different routes and desire lines to the beach following trails created by previous visitors.

The playpark was observed in good condition and well maintained although some of the wooden play features had parts missing.

The boardwalk trail was observed well maintained. At the end of the boardwalk families were observed accessing the beach using a variety of paths and routes.

Limited use of the trail maps and information boards was observed with only one family reviewing the trail maps.

Most of the families observed had small children and seemed interested in the playpark only.

## **Appendix 1 – Activity & Impact Codes**

Activities		
<b>Category 1 Low Level</b>		
Walking, running or cycling on paths, marked trails or hard surfaces		LA 1
Walking, running, cycling or playing in mown grass, managed grassland or level sand		LA 2
Sitting on benches, walls, mown grass, sand		LA 3
Swimming, sailing, surfing, kayaking in water		LA 4
Resting, reading, looking, picnicking, sightseeing, painting, photographing		LA 5
Vehicular movement on roads and parking areas		LA 6
Watching nature in hedges, woods, streams, pools and intertidal areas		LA 7
<b>Category 2 Medium Level</b>		
Powered movement through water		MA 1
Any movement leaving an existing trail or marked path		MA 2
Any movement leaving a trail through leafy vegetation		MA 3
Any movement leaving a trail through woody vegetation		MA 4
Climbing on walls, loose stones, sand, soil etc.		MA 5
Fishing		MA 6
<b>Category 3 High Level</b>		
Walking through wet/muddy soil		HA 1
Scrambling on steep or loose slopes		HA 2
Off road vehicular movement		HA 3
Disturbance of wildlife		HA 4
Deliberate building or moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand etc.		HA 5
Picking herbaceous vegetation		HA 6

Impacts		
<b>Category 1 Low Impact</b>		
No identifiable effect		LIE 1
Desire lines or trails visible on grass and leafy vegetation		LIE 2
Temporary disturbance (including chasing and feeding) of insects, fish, amphibian, reptiles, insects, birds and mammals		LIE 3
Temporary change of character - due to the appearance or nature of activities (noise, crowds, etc.)		LIE 4
General/light littering		LIE 5
<b>Category 2 Medium Impact</b>		
Desire lines or tracks visible outside of existing trail or marked path		MIE 1
Trampling of herbaceous vegetation		MIE 2
Damage to woody vegetation		MIE 3
Incidentally moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		MIE 4
Addition/alteration of site features, transient emissions, noise		MIE 5
Transient disturbance, emissions, noise		MIE 6
Disturbance of wildlife		MIE 7
<b>Category 3 Severe Impact</b>		
Direct interference with site material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 1
Removal of material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 2
Vandalism or graffiti		SIE 3
Destruction of structures, vegetation or fauna		SIE 4
Heavy littering or dumping quantities of waste		SIE 5
Burning materials or lighting a fire		SIE 6
Injuring, killing or taking wildlife		SIE 7



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National Tourism  
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