

Blue lines indicate the area meeting the ISRA Criteria; dashed lines indicate the suggested buffer for use in the development of appropriate place-based conservation measures

## ANTRIM COAST ISRA

### European Atlantic Region

#### SUMMARY

Antrim Coast is located on the coast of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The area is characterised by a variety of demersal habitat features including mudflats, gravel, maerl, and sandbanks, as well as deeper water areas and submerged sea caves. The area connects the North Atlantic Ocean and the Irish Sea, encompassing fast flowing currents and the deep North Channel. The area overlaps with three Key Biodiversity Areas and one Ramsar Site. Within this area there are: **threatened species** and **undefined aggregations** (Spiny Dogfish *Squalus acanthias*).

#### CRITERIA

**Criterion A - Vulnerability; Sub-criterion C5 - Undefined Aggregations**

— —  
**THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND**  
 — —

— —  
**0-150 metres**  
 — —

— —  
**598.7 km<sup>2</sup>**  
 — —





## DESCRIPTION OF HABITAT

Antrim Coast is located on the coast of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The area encompasses many bays and inlets including Red Bay, which is characterised by sandbanks of live maerl, gravel, cobbles, and sub-fossil maerl (DAERA 2025a), and Belfast Lough, a large intertidal estuary of the River Lagan. The outer lough is mainly rocky shores and small sandy bays, and the inner lough consists of mudflats and lagoons (Ramsar 2025). Just offshore and north of Belfast Lough is the Maidens, a group of small rocky reefs off northeast Larne. These reefs have rare habitats due to regional hydrographic conditions. The Maidens is within the North Channel, which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Irish Sea, experiencing fast flowing currents and in close proximity to deep upwelling water (DAERA 2025b). Rathlin Island is in the north of the area and includes reefs, submerged sea caves, shallow sandbanks, and vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic coast (DAERA 2025c). Larne Lough consists of mudflats and mussel-beds (KBA 2025b).

The area encompasses the Belfast Lough Ramsar Site (Wetland of International Importance; Ramsar 2025) and three Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA): Rathlin Island KBA (KBA 2025a), Larne Lough KBA (KBA 2025b), and Belfast Lough KBA (KBA 2025c).

This Important Shark and Ray Area is benthic and pelagic and is delineated from inshore and surface waters (0 m) to a depth of 150 m based on the bathymetry of the area.

## ISRA CRITERIA

### CRITERION A – VULNERABILITY

One Qualifying Species considered threatened with extinction according to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species regularly occurs in the area. This is the Vulnerable Spiny Dogfish (Finucci et al. 2021).

### SUB-CRITERION C5 – UNDEFINED AGGREGATIONS

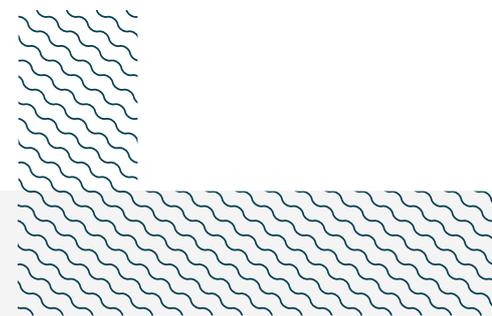
Antrim Coast is an important area for undefined aggregations of one shark species.

Data were obtained from the Inland Fisheries Ireland's (IFI) Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme (IFI 2023; IFI unpubl. data 2025). The programme provides data from sharks and rays caught on rod-and-line by sports fishers, tagged with conventional tags, released, and reported to IFI's Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme. Fishing trips were either from shore or from a boat and ranged from 2–8 hours per day. Reports are limited to successful trips, where at least one shark or ray was captured. Catch is reported as the number of individuals of a species caught per angling trip in one day, and aggregations refer to trips in which >3 individuals were caught. The angling season spans April–October with peak aggregations of species between June–August annually.

Antrim Coast is a popular fishing site for Spiny Dogfish, and is visited by anglers each year, which is highlighted in angling blogs, forums, and social media pages. Local ecological knowledge informs that this area is a hotspot for Spiny Dogfish, with one angling blog stating “The north coast offers the greatest chance of running into a pack of Spurs (Spiny Dogfish), where they can be found on numerous marks dotted along the coastline from Downings in North Donegal and travelling south through Antrim into County Down and beyond” (Sea Angling Ireland 2025). A large number of angling websites share videos and reports of large numbers or ‘packs’ of Spiny Dogfish from this area.

Of the 412 Spiny Dogfish that were captured and tagged around the Irish coast between 2010–2024 through IFI’s Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme, almost half (47%; n = 192) were recorded in the area. Spiny Dogfish were recorded on 29 trips and aggregations were caught on 17 occasions (3–48 individuals) with a mean group size of 10.6 individuals. Almost all individuals were female (female:male 1:0.02). Months with observed aggregations were: January 2010, March 2011, July 2011, August 2011, February 2012, June 2012, August 2012, August 2013, August 2015, September 2015, February 2019, January 2020, July 2022, August 2023, and February 2024.

In addition, the Irish Specimen Fish Committee (ISFC; Casserly & Roche 2023) collects angling reports of large individuals of marine and freshwater fish. Species and length are verified using photographic evidence before inclusion in the ISFC report each year. Of the 745 reports to the IFSC of large (>5.4 kg or >105 cm total length [TL]) Spiny Dogfish from around the Irish coast from 2010–2024, almost half (49%; n = 363) were from the area. Aggregations were reported on nine occasions with a mean aggregation size of 3.5 individuals and a maximum aggregation of five individuals (Casserly & Roche 2023). Anglers do not chum the water when fishing for Spiny Dogfish indicating that these animals are naturally present in high abundances. Aggregating behaviour is common in Spiny Dogfish, which are known to form large aggregations segregated by sex (Colonello et al. 2016; FishBase 2025). Almost half of the data from the entire island of Ireland from both IFI’s Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme and the IFSC occur in this area, highlighting the regional importance of this area for Spiny Dogfish. However, more information is needed to understand the nature and function of these aggregations.



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## Acknowledgments

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## Suggested citation

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## QUALIFYING SPECIES

Scientific Name	Common Name	IUCN Red List Category	Global Depth Range (m)	ISRA Criteria/Sub-criteria Met									
				A	B	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	D1	D2	
<b>SHARKS</b>													
<i>Squalus acanthias</i>	Spiny Dogfish	VU	0-1,978	X							X		

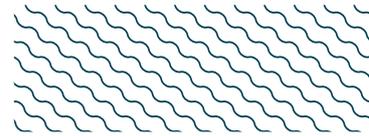
## SUPPORTING SPECIES

Scientific Name	Common Name	IUCN Red List Category
<b>SHARKS</b>		
<i>Galeus melastomus</i>	Blackmouth Catshark	LC
<i>Galeorhinus galeus</i>	Tope	CR
<i>Lamna nasus</i>	Porbeagle	VU
<i>Scyliorhinus canicula</i>	Smallspotted Catshark	LC
<i>Scyliorhinus stellaris</i>	Nursehound	VU
<b>RAYS</b>		
<i>Dipturus intermedius</i>	Flapper Skate	CR
<i>Leucoraja naevus</i>	Cuckoo Skate	LC
<i>Raja brachyura</i>	Blonde Skate	NT
<i>Raja clavata</i>	Thornback Skate	LC

*IUCN Red List of Threatened Species Categories are available by searching species names at [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org). Abbreviations refer to: CR, Critically Endangered; EN, Endangered; VU, Vulnerable; NT, Near Threatened; LC, Least Concern; DD, Data Deficient.*



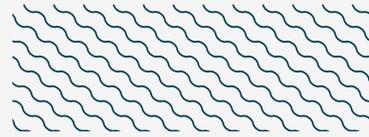
## SUPPORTING INFORMATION



There are additional indications that this area is important for reproduction of Blackmouth Catshark and aggregations of Flapper Skate.

The Irish Specimen Fish Committee received records of 94 large adult (>1 kg) Blackmouth Catsharks caught around the island of Ireland between 2010–2020, all of which were within this area. A further seven Blackmouth Catsharks were tagged as part of Inland Fisheries Ireland’s Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme using Petersen discs and roto tags around the Irish coast between 2010–2011, all of which were within this area. Mature males and females were encountered on every angling trip. On one occasion, a captured pregnant female released six live egg cases which were given to an aquarium and hatched after nine months. It is uncommon for Blackmouth Catsharks to occur so close to shore, but the deep waters between Northern Ireland and Scotland provide a rare suitable nearshore habitat for this species. While these numbers are low, every single one of the records for this species in either the ISFC or IFI’s Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme occur within this area. Given the consistent capture of large adult individuals and the mix of both males and females on every trip, as well as the instance of the pregnant female, this appears to be a regionally important reproductive area for Blackmouth Catshark.

Flapper Skate data were reported from individuals caught on rod-and-line by sport fishers, uniquely tagged with conventional floy tags, released, and reported to Ulster Wildlife’s SeaDeep Programme as well as the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of Northern Ireland (DAERA), who run the Northern Ireland elasmobranch tagging project. Trips were either from shore or from a boat and ranged from 4–8 hours per day. Reports are limited to successful trips (where at least one Flapper Skate was captured). Catch is reported as the number of individuals of a species per angling trip in one day and aggregations refer to trips in which >3 individuals of the same species were caught. The angling season spans all year round, with the majority of catches occurring between April–December and peak aggregations recorded between June–August annually. This is a locally known hotspot for Flapper Skates in Northern Ireland due to the unique bathymetry of deep, high-energy habitat. Of the 223 records of tagged Flapper Skate in Northern Ireland’s inshore waters, 95% (n = 212) were recorded within the area. Within the area, 212 Flapper Skate were tagged between June 2016–November 2024. Three or more individuals on a single trip were caught and tagged on 33 different dates, all between the months of June–December, with up to eight individuals caught on an individual trip. Furthermore, recapture data from IFI’s Marine Sportfish Tagging Programme shows three conventionally tagged Flapper Skate recaptures in the area: one at Belfast Lough in September 2021, first tagged in Belfast Lough in November 2020; and two tagged at Ballylumford in February 2024 and recaptured in March 2024 in the same area.



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