

Nature & Wildlife




Connemara Sands
BEACH HOTEL SPA



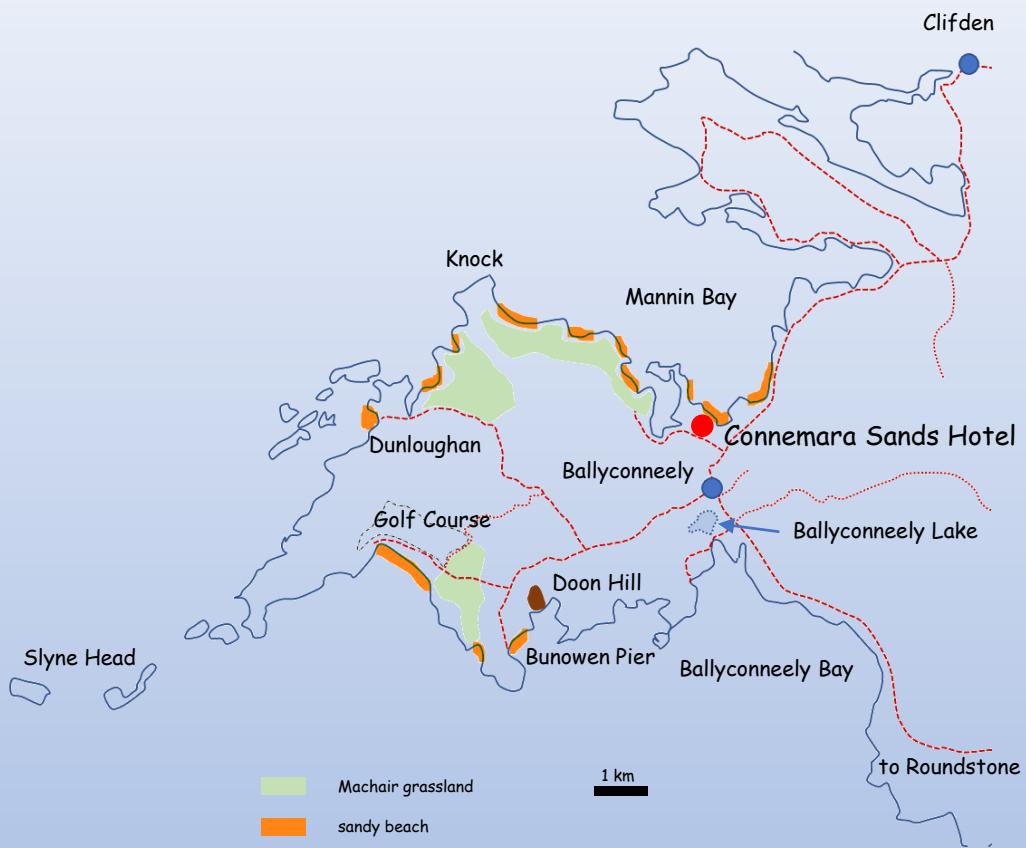
Connemara Sands Hotel & Spa is a family owned and operated boutique hotel perfectly positioned on the Slyne Peninsula in the heart of Connemara and The Wild Atlantic Way. Cradled by the Twelve Bens mountain range, white sandy shores and azure blue waters of Mannin Bay, there is no better place from which to explore the unique nature and natural history of the area.

The Slyne Peninsula is also locally known as Errismore - the 'big peninsula' as in Gaelic **erris** is a peninsula and **more** means big. Errismore, a Special Area of Conservation, is a beautiful and gentle landscape covered by a patchwork of small traditionally-farmed fields of grassland, gorse and heather heathland, interspersed with small lakes, swamp, bog and fen, and several extensive areas of rare machair grassland and sand dunes. This maze of habitats, fringed by rocky shore and pristine golden sandy beaches supports a huge range of wildlife.

Whatever the time of year, there is always a great variety of nature and wildlife to be found and seen.



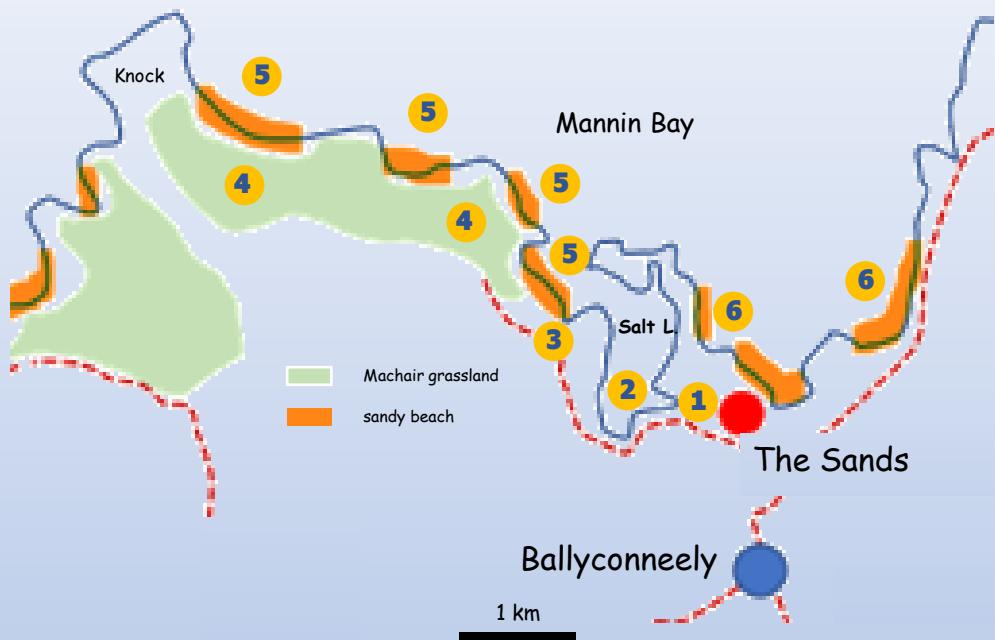
Errismore: Local landmarks





The Connemara Sands Hotel is surrounded by nature: pasture, scrub, reeds, salt marsh and beach

Exploring Mannin Bay's southern shore



- 1 Salt Marsh
- 2 Salt Lough
- 3 Ship Harbour
- 4 Machair
- 5 Sandy beach
- 6 Coral beach

Salt Marsh

1

Something thought provoking? It may not look anything special - a small area of salt marsh with a small muddy tidal inlet. But look closer. The banks of the inlet are cut into a layer of peat on which the salt marsh is growing. The peat here was formed by accumulation over 100's of years of decayed freshwater wetland plant material. Salt marsh growing on freshwater peat is rare and found at only a few localities in western Ireland. How then is the peat, which formed under freshwater conditions, now found here covered by sea water at high tides? Has the land sunk or the sea level risen?.



During glaciations ice sheets store vast quantities of water causing sea levels to fall while the weight of ice sheets depresses the underlying ground surface. At the end of the glaciation the ice sheets melt and sea-level rises while, at the same time but at a slower rate, ground surface rises as the weight of the ice sheet is removed. The salt marsh peat layer records a history of the interplay between falling sea level and rising land. Nearby, archaeological evidence indicates that eventually, around 4500 years ago, sea level rise had created the salt marsh conditions we see today.

Like many things in nature complex goings-on are hidden in plain sight.

Keep a look out for birds feeding in the muddy inlet - Redshank, Green Shank, Sandpiper, Egret, Heron and other birds can often be seen here.

Salt Lough

A narrow inlet from the sea lets the tides in and out from the Salt Lough. A colony of Common Seals have made it their home. Look out for them basking on the rocks. The causeway at the head of the lough is a good place, especially at lower tides, to see birds feeding on the mud and seaweed covered rocks.

The black colour of the rocks below the high tide mark is caused by a black lichen.



Out beyond the Salt Lough in Mannin Bay keep a look out for Otters hunting in among the seaweed, Grey Seals (with a distinctive Roman nose profile) and Dolphins which can sometimes be seen when they visit Mannin Bay.

Ship Harbour

3



Follow the road uphill from the causeway at the end of the Salt Lake and carry straight, ignore the road to your left. Small fields bounded by ancient stone walls are rich in flowers and wildlife.

The photo, taken in May, shows the old ship harbour at low tide. In the foreground are Yellow Iris (locally called Flags) not yet in flower.

Machair

On Errismore are several areas of calcareous sandy coastal pasture. This grassland is machair (from Gaelic meaning flat or low-lying), a habitat that only occurs in the west of Ireland and Scotland, when sandy coastal pasture is lightly grazed. Machair is unusually fertile grassland, enriched by winds driving off the Atlantic that blow tiny fragments of seashells over the sand that fertilises the poor soil, creating a rich grassland. By early summer the machair puts on one of the greatest wildflower displays anywhere in Europe, with astonishing flower colours and fragrances from the carpet of diverse wildflowers - Red Fescue, Bird's-foot Trefoil, White Clover, Yarrow, Lady's Bedstraw, Ribwort Plantain, Eyebright, Daisy, Orchids and more



The combination of Skylark song and the fragrance of flowers on a sunny summer's day is pure magic.

Where machair meets the beach



Beaches

A string of pristine golden beaches, rock pools and turquoise sea fringe the southern margin of Mannin Bay



The Beach: Rock pools



Sea Hare

The Beach: Archaeology



Remains of an old kitchen shell midden (a rubbish heap where discarded shells of shellfish used for food were thrown). In this example the heap has subsequently been spread out to now form a layer of shells, together with blackened burnt rocks. The rocks likely became burnt from being used to cook the shellfish by boiling.

Midden remains found at various coastal sites Errismore and elsewhere in western Ireland, range in age from around 2000 BC to the Medieval period. The combination of the machair's abundant grazing and nearby sheltered dunes, would have provided ideal locations for pastoral farmers to make a seasonal summer dwelling in times long past.

Shell middens and habitation sites, located in the dune system on Errismore, have been exposed and are slowly disappearing through wind, wave, surface erosion and damage from trampling by animals and human activities.

Archaeological sites are very fragile: please do not disturb

Coral Sand

Mannin Bay is large and shallow with islets and rocks at its mouth providing some shelter from Atlantic swells. Tidal streams are weak and conditions become even more sheltered towards the head of the bay. Here, white sandy beaches are composed of countless small fragments of broken remains of the calcareous 'skeletons' of **red seaweeds** that grow on Mannin Bay's sheltered seabed. The fragments are coral-like in appearance and the beaches are often called 'coral strands'. Real corals are animals that grow in seas warmer than those in Connemara. So these wonderful beaches are not made from real coral but instead, and just as fascinating, composed of the remains of marine plants!

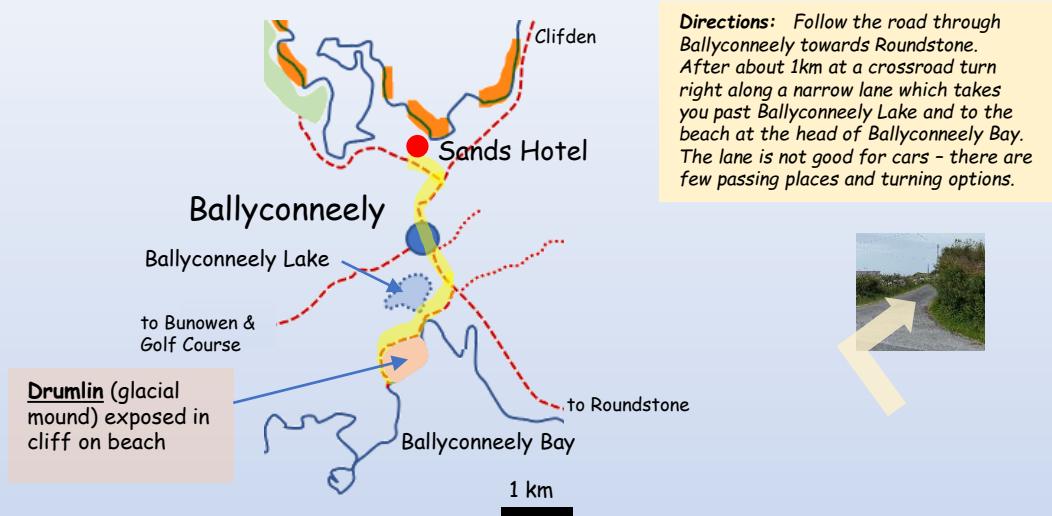


Underlined bold text in this document indicates that there is a link to a webpage where further information can be found, e.g.

red seaweeds



Nearby: Ballyconneely Lake & Bay



Ballyconneely Lake is a shallow (0.5m), natural very low salinity lagoon with a sluiced outlet into Ballyconneely Bay. Irish Mute Swans are joined in the autumn by over-wintering Whooper Swans from Iceland



Cliff at the head of Ballyconneely Bay exposing the sand, silts and rocks of an eroding glacial mound (Drumlin). Drumlins in the Errismore are of great interest to earth scientists studying the last glaciation in western Ireland.

Nearby: Doon Hill - the Ballyconneely volcano



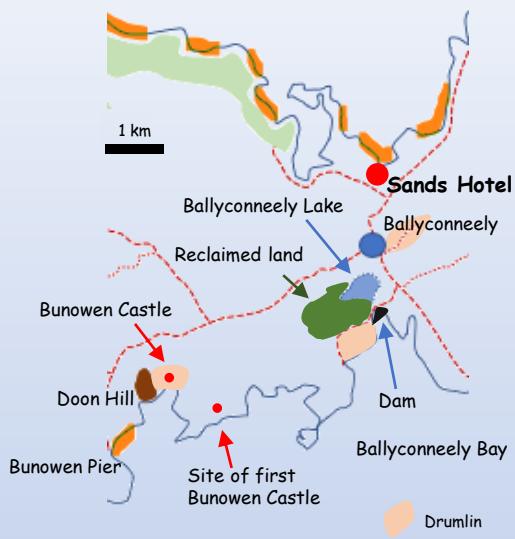
View from the road to Bunowen



View from Bunowen

Doon Hill, at 64m, the highest point on Errismore, is formed from a remnant of basaltic magma solidified in the vent of an ancient small volcano that would originally have been surrounded by a cone of cinder, since eroded away. The volcano erupted around 65 million years ago at the same time as volcanic activity in Northern Ireland formed the Giant's Causeway. Although the solidified magma at 65 million years is very old, it is much much younger than the rocks through which it passed on its way to the surface. These rocks are around 470 million years old.

Bunowen Castle & Dutch-style land reclamation



There has been a castle at Bunowen since the early 1500's but not always at the site of the Castle standing today. The first castle was a tower-house with a rectangular walled enclosure. There were no roads in the 1500's and the only access to the castle was by a narrow and rocky inlet on the eastern edge of Bunowen Bay - a naturally fortified location giving the castle protection from unwelcome guests.



In the early 1700's Richard Geoghegan began to build the present-day Castle on the grassy mound (actually a glacial [Drumlin](#)) in the lee of Doon Hill.

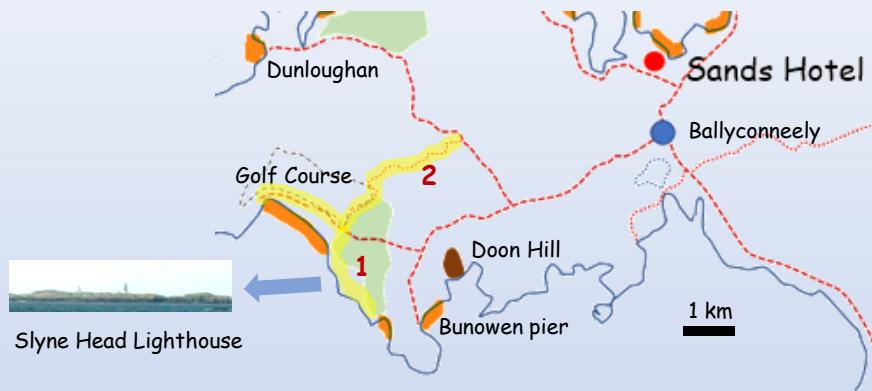
Hoping to improve the land on his extensive estate, he visited the Netherlands to learn of methods used by the Dutch to reclaim land from the sea. Upon his return a dam was built and more than 18 hectares of land reclaimed. All that's left of the land previously flooded by the sea is Ballyconneely Lake but the low lying reclaimed land can partially flood after very heavy rainfall.



Reclaimed land

[Bunowen Castle](#) at the foot of Doon Hill was further extended John Augustus O'Neill (Richard Geoghegan's grandson) in the late 1830's but he ran out of money before the building work was completed. Later the castle was used as an impressive summer seaside 'cottage' for the Blakes of the Towerhill estate near Carnacon, Co Mayo. In the mid-nineteenth century, during the famine, it was used as an auxiliary poor house. It is now a ruin.

Walks in the Golf Course area



1 Walk anywhere on the machair or along the coast and enjoy spectacular panoramic views of the mountains, the sea and to the west, Slyne Head lighthouse. Often many birds can be seen along the shoreline.

In spring and summer the sky is filled with the song of skylarks

- 2** Follow the road along the eastern boundary of the Golf Course. There can be spectacular displays of pyramidal orchids and harebells on parts of the golf course machair. The road becomes a track which eventually joins the Dunloughan road. The track passes through typical small rocky fields, rich in flowers and wildlife.



Nature notes

The rocky and boggy landscape, unsuited to the plough and largely just grazed by cattle, sheep and ponies has saved Errismore from loss of natural habitats. Elsewhere, in more fertile areas, a loss of biodiversity and habitats has occurred through ploughing, use of fertiliser, herbicides and pesticides. Ecological stability has allowed wildlife to flourish and the area is a haven for plants and wildlife. The nature and wildlife is best experienced by simply taking a walk through the countryside. The sheer variety of habitats in such a small area guarantees that there will always be something interesting to see.

Flowers and plants coexist in rich and vibrant communities putting on both spectacular and, on closer inspection, subtle shows throughout much of the year.



Spectacular: Green Veined Orchid



Subtle: rock plant community



Ragged Robin thrives in damp ground



Lousewort common in boggy ground



Springtime and Thrift on the coast



Orchids of many kinds are common on Errismore



Flowers carpet the landscape in summer



Spectacular colours in late summer



Western gorse and heathers put on a blazing show of colour in late summer



Our debt to Yellow Ants: Small mounds abound in the traditionally farmed fields. Each mound provides a micro-habitat for plant communities. The mounds result from the activities of Yellow Ants who carry particles of soil to build small, free-draining mounds for their colonies. The mounds are preserved because the fields have not been ploughed and have become ideal spots for plant communities to develop.

The area is the home to a wide variety of wildlife.



Seals, dolphins and sometimes even whales, can be seen in the sea off Errismore. Otter, quite secretive and seldom seen, also live here.

Badger, fox, stoat, rabbit and hare can be seen anywhere on Errismore.



Badger

The Irish hare is thought to have been in Ireland for the last 1 million years and has developed into a race separate from the brown hare which lives in Northern Ireland. Females are larger than males and during the breeding season hares seen 'boxing' are likely to be a female boxing a male. The tail is always white as is the underbelly.



The Common Frog is the only species of frog found in Ireland. Skin colour ranges from a pale green-grey through yellow to a dark olive-coloured brown. The only regular markings are the dark bars across the limbs, and streaks behind and in front of the eyes. A frog can also make its skin become darker to match its surroundings. This colour change takes about two hours.



Viviparous lizard, small, shy and elusive, Ireland's only native species of reptile, gives birth to live young, a rarity in the reptile world, where most species lay eggs. The lizard lives in bogs, coastal sites, grasslands and uplands and emerges from hibernation in the spring. They are most active in April when courtship and mating occur. The young are born in September - another good time for lizard spotting.

There are **no snakes** in Ireland. They didn't manage to cross to Ireland before sea level rose after the last ice age ended.

Errismore is a permanent home, summer breeding ground, winter refuge, and a 'fuel-stop' for a great variety of birds. While there is little woodland, the mosaic of different habitats - open sea, bays, inlets, lagoon, loughs, marsh, bogs, machair and pasture and heathland - in such a small area, makes it an ideal place to see and hear birds. Common Irish countryside and shoreline birds - blackbird, robin, wren, thrush, jackdaw, rook oystercatcher, ringed plover, etc. live here year round with numbers augmented by summer and winter migrants. [Irishbirding](#) and [BirdWatch Galway](#) report bird sightings in Co. Galway.

A list (not exhaustive) of birds that you might see in the area:



Birds through the year



Stonechats are residents found mainly in the small rocky fields, the males singing and calling from a prominent perch.



Wheatear migrate from Africa and arrive from early March to April. Large flocks can pass through on their way north to Iceland and beyond. Those that stay make their home on the machair and rough pasture.



The shoreline is busy in April. **Brent Geese** overwinter on coastal estuaries in Ireland. In early spring they depart for their breeding grounds in high-arctic Canada. Some break their migration to refuel on Sea Lettuce in Mannin Bay before continuing their journey. The beach is also busy with **Sanderlings**, who scurry back and forth through the surf looking for food. Dunlin, with a prominent black belly patch join Sanderlings on the beach.



Cuckoo



Meadow Pipit

The **Cuckoo** arrives in the second half of April. It is the male bird's call that we hear. The female Cuckoo lays a single egg in up to 20 different **Meadow Pipit** nests. The male Cuckoos stop calling towards the end of June when the adults return to Africa. The Cuckoo chicks are raised by the much smaller Meadow Pipit surrogate parents. Young Cuckoos don't leave until later in summer for wintering grounds in central and southern Africa.



'The Maybird' is a local name for a Whimbrel. Whimbrel in the field next to the Sands Hotel - non-paying guests for few-days re-fuelling stopover in May, on their journey from the west African coast to breeding grounds in Iceland. They sometimes stopover again on their return migration to west Africa.



Sedge Warbler, another summer visitor from Africa can be heard during the breeding season singing its busy trilling song in reeds and scrubby bushes in the Sands Hotel grounds.

On a still evening or morning you might also hear another summer migrant, the Grasshopper Warbler with its distinctive grasshopper sounding song.



An evening walk near any boggy land on Errismore and there's a good chance of both seeing and hearing a Snipe as it makes a display flight over its nesting territory. It makes a strange droning sound called drumming, produced by stiff feathers sticking out at the tail sides, which vibrate as the bird flies in a roller coaster pattern in the sky.



The song of the Skylark - the sound of spring and summer on Errismore. Almost everywhere, especially the coastal machair grasslands, the song of Skylarks singing as they soar high in the sky, provides a magic soundscape.



At a distance the Chough looks like a typical all-black crow. Close-up, however, down-curved red bill and bright red legs are unique; the Irish name translates as "red-legged Jackdaw". Choughs also have prominently "fingered" flight-feathers giving a distinctive silhouette in the air. Aerobatic fliers, Choughs frequently swoop and soar and have a very distinctive call. Western Ireland is a stronghold of the Chough.

Last, but not least, because of the great habitat variety and pesticide-free farming, insects (too many perhaps if midges are included) butterflies and moths thrive.



Useful websites

Wildflowers of Ireland

Irish Wildflowers

Irish Wildlife Trust

Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

Vincent Wildlife Trust Ireland - lots of information about Irish mammals

Irishbirding

BirdWatch Galway

BirdWatch Ireland

RSPB - for bird song recordings

Irish Butterflies

Irish Moths and Butterflies

National Biodiversity Data Centre - documenting Ireland's wildlife

Irish Peatland Conservation Council

Late October Connemara sunset looking south to Bunowen Castle and Doon Hill



© Michael E Badley


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★ ★ ★ ★

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