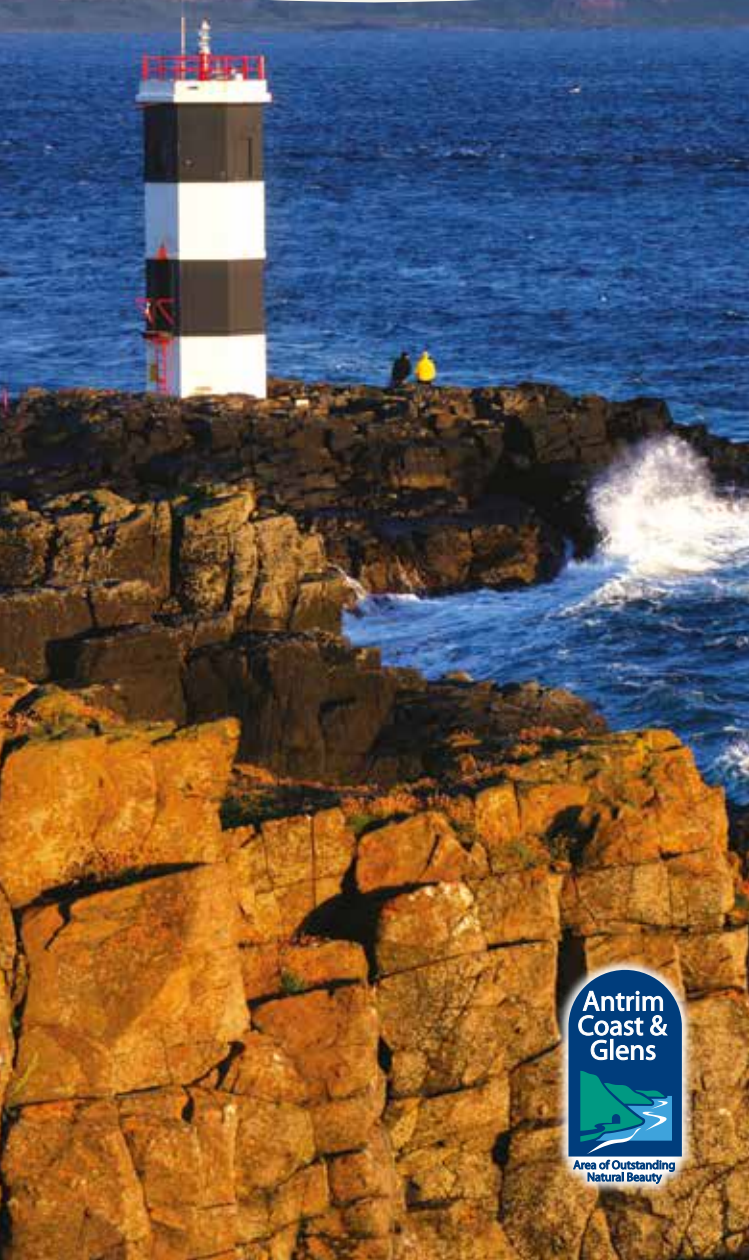


# Antrim Coast and Glens

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



# Antrim Coast and Glens

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

## A place of exceptional beauty

Welcome to Antrim Coast and Glens AONB. This region has some of the most beautiful and varied scenery in Northern Ireland. As well as exploring its rich natural, cultural and built heritage, you will be able to discover the many fascinating geological features that give the Antrim Coast & Glens its unique character.

The special landscapes that make up the Antrim Coast & Glens area are of national importance and it has been recognised as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The award of AONB is designed to preserve and enhance this wonderful area so that it can be enjoyed by present and future generations.



Glenariff Forest Park © Tourism NI



Glenariff ©Tourism NI

# NATURAL HERITAGE

## Antrim Coast + Glens AONB

### The most amazing scenery

The Antrim Coast and Glens Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) comprises of more than 724 km<sup>2</sup> of rugged coastline and spectacular glens on the north-eastern shoulder of Northern Ireland. It stretches from the towns of Larne to Ballycastle, taking in the Glens of Antrim and Rathlin Island (Northern Ireland's only inhabited island). It contains a range of stunning sights, from pretty coastal villages, deep valleys and spectacular cliffs, to wild upland bogs and rugged farmland. Many of its people share a rich cultural legacy with nearby Scotland – in the 5th to 7th centuries this area lay within the ancient kingdom of Dal Riada which encompassed much of Scotland's west coast.

The Antrim Plateau dominates the area rising to over 500 metres at its highest points. The plateau was formed some 60 million years ago when successive eruptions of lava cooled to form layers of basalt rock. But even this hard substrate could not withstand the erosive effects of ice – around 20,000 years ago huge ice sheets gouged out the deep valleys which form the famous Nine Glens of Antrim.

Patterns of settlement stretch back to the Mesolithic period. Ancient tombs dot the landscape and in the 5th century, Saint Patrick tended sheep on these uplands as a young slave farmer. Ancient castles stand on hill and shore, reminders of a time when the MacDonnell's were the most powerful clan in North Antrim. Notorious highwaymen once targeted travellers on the old high roads. No wonder most people preferred to journey by boat. Change came in the mid-1800s when the Antrim Coast Road was built. Clinging to the narrow strip of coastline between sea and high cliffs, it now offers one of the world's top road journeys. Every corner reveals the most amazing scenery of unspoilt beaches, charming villages, historic castles, graveyards and harbours.



Minke whale ©Tom McDonnell

## GEOLOGY

### What lies beneath

For what is quite a small area of land, the Antrim Coast & Glens AONB has an extremely diverse range of rocks and landscapes. The oldest rocks formed about 650 million years ago when an ocean covered what is now the island of Ireland. Sedimentary rocks such as limestone were laid down during periods of immersion. Movement of the earth's crust pushed this land northwards and upwards – therefore about 400 million years ago, the north of Ireland was part of a mountain range that was larger and higher than today's Himalayas. The climate at that time was hot and dry and the mountains gradually eroded down, their weathered remains forming the conglomerate and sandstone deposits which can be seen at Cushendun.

### Land of fire

This area experienced truly explosive conditions during a period of volcanic activity that began some 55-66 million years ago. Vast lava flows formed the Antrim Plateau that stretches from the North Antrim Coast to Cave Hill, just north of Belfast and as far west as Binevenagh Mountain, Limavady. These hard basalt layers capped and partially baked the softer rocks, preserving them. Along the Antrim Coast Road basalt can be seen overlying limestone layers.



Torr Scenic Drive ©Richard Donaghey





Bonamargy Friary ©Tourism NI

## The big freeze

The most spectacular environmental event in recent geological time was the last Ice Age, which peaked about 21,000 years ago and ended around 11,500 years ago. At its height, a huge mass of ice, thousands of metres thick, covered this area. Its slow, grinding movements created some of the Antrim Coast & Glens AONB's most distinctive landscape features, such as the u-shaped valleys of the Nine Glens of Antrim. As the ice melted and retreated, sea levels rose, but the reduced weight of ice on top of the land caused it to rebound upwards, leaving a series of raised beaches above the level of the coastline. Classic examples of these can be seen at South Bay near Carnlough – in fact the Coast Road is built on these raised beaches.

## Today's landscape

The Antrim Coast & Glens AONB's geology has created some wonderfully diverse landscapes. Slemish Mountain, an old volcanic plug, is a distinctive landmark on the Antrim Plateau, while at the coast, broad sweeping bays are punctuated by striking headlands reaching out into the North Channel, including Fair Head, Garron Point and Torr Head.



Cushendun Caves ©Tourism NI



Wood crane's-bill © Geoff Campbell

# FLORA AND FAUNA

## Alive with wildlife

The Antrim Coast & Glens AONB contains an amazingly diverse range of habitat types, including woodland, grassland, bog, heathland, peatland, wetland, coastal and marine areas. These in turn support a huge number and variety of plants and animals.

## Rathlin

Robert the Bruce took refuge in a cave here in 1306 but nowadays about 250,000 birds nest on Rathlin Island each year, many returning to the 70-metre high cliffs to nest. Around 20,000 visitors come each year to see the Atlantic puffins, Common guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars and Kittiwakes that fill the air and line the cliffs. May, June and July are the best times to see the breeding birds. Islanders used to abseil down the cliffs to collect birds eggs, but the birds are now protected. The Irish Hare prospers on Rathlin including the rare golden hare which has a genetic mutation giving it a golden coat and blue eyes.

## The deep blue sea

The coastline and waters are alive with marine life. Whales, dolphins and porpoises are regular visitors while Common and Grey seals breed in the rocky coves and caves. Basking sharks are frequent visitors too, feeding in the plankton-rich waters of the North Channel.

Under the waves around Rathlin the diverse geological features and nutrient rich seas support a wide diversity of marine life. The reefs and sea caves are of particular note and the array of sponges and corals they support, some found nowhere else in the world.



## Moving inland

The slopes of the Glens of Antrim provide a home for many species. Red squirrels thrive in the safe refuges of the forests and woods of the Glens, such as Cregagh, Glenarm and Straidkilly. The deciduous woods of the Glens are home to summer migrant birds such as Blackcap, Spotted flycatcher and the rare Wood warbler and have recently been colonised by Great spotted woodpeckers. Overhead, Buzzards circle in the thermals while Peregrine falcons divebomb for prey at over 200 mph. The small spate rivers of the Glens still get runs of Atlantic salmon and Sea trout.

## The uplands

The animals and plants that inhabit the harsh, exposed bogs of the Antrim Plateau are well adapted to its conditions. Red grouse, Snipe and Curlew nest in its patchwork of heath and grassland. The Antrim Hills are also a stronghold for the majestic Hen harrier which needs large areas of open habitat to hunt its prey of small birds and mammals.

## Grasslands

Modern intensive farming has had a dramatic impact on traditional grasslands. Fortunately, in some areas, wildflower meadows have been preserved which support a rich and diverse assemblage of plants, including Wood crane's bill, Pyramidal bugle, Great burnet and Meadow crane's-bill. The area is also home to one of Northern Ireland's rarest grasses, Tor-grass.



Red squirrel ©Tom McDonnell



# PEOPLE AND PLACES

## The Scottish connection

The Antrim Coast & Glens has long had close connections with Scotland. As early as the fifth to seventh centuries this area lay within the ancient kingdom of Dal Riada. Centred around the west coast of Scotland, it included most of the north coast of County Antrim. Settled by lowland Scots Presbyterian throughout the seventeenth century, the Scottish influence is still evident in the language, place names, music and dance of the area.

Throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, villages along this coastline grew from small ports into important industrial hubs - exploiting the natural resources of the sea and land; exporting a wealth of limestone, basalt, iron ore, timber and fish to markets in Scotland, and beyond.

## Glenarm

The ancient village of Glenarm nestles at the foot of Glenarm Glen, first of the nine Glens of Antrim. Throughout its long history Glenarm has been a Norman stronghold, the power base for Irish warlords and one of the most important ports in Ireland. There has been a castle in Glenarm as far back as 1270, and perhaps even earlier. The present Glenarm Castle dates to 1636, when Sir Randall McDonnell built the first stronghold on the site. His descendants still live in the castle.

## Ballycastle

Sitting at the mouth of the Margy River, Ballycastle looks straight out across the sea to Rathlin Island. To the east it is bordered by the magnificent Fair Head and behind it rises the imposing Knocklayd Mountain. Its name comes from the Irish, Baile an Chaisil, meaning "town of the castle", possibly built around 1620 by the MacDonnells. The town is famous for the Auld Lammas Fair held in August every year, which dates back to the seventeenth century. Just outside the town lies the thirteenth-century Franciscan friary at Bonamargy. Mention it to any local and talk will turn to Julia McQuillan, "the Black Nun", who lived and died there in the 1600s. She prophesied many events, some of which have come true ... others not yet.





Marsh saxifrage © Geoff Campbell

## Carnlough

Carnlough means the place of cairns in Irish. It is located at the bottom of Glencloy and is the second of the Nine Glens of Antrim. The village was once a major exporter of limestone, with a railway that brought the stone from quarries in the hills down to the harbour. Much of the town, including the harbour, was built using this limestone. Nowadays it is famous for its hotel, the Londonderry Arms, built as a coaching inn in 1848 and later bequeathed to Sir Winston Churchill.

## Cushendall

Cushendall is the meeting point for three of the Nine Glens of Antrim - Glenann, Glenballyeamon and Glencorp. The Curfew Tower is the central focus of the town. It was built by Francis Turnly in 1817 to confine 'riotous prisoners'. Dan McBride, a retired soldier, was given the job of permanent guard and was well armed, with one musket, a bayonet, a brace of pistols and a ferocious pike almost four metres long!

## Cushendun

Cushendun village was built at the mouth of the River Dun and it sits on the glacial outflows of Glendun and Glencorp. It has been a crossing point between Ireland and Scotland for many centuries. A ferry ran between here and the Mull of Kintyre, 15 miles across the North Channel, from 1709 until 1803. In 1912 Lord Cushendun commissioned the architect Clough Williams-Ellis to design the village square. The delightful whitewashed cottages with hanging slates on the first storey were built in 1923.

## Education, education, education

The coast road is packed with hidden gems, if you know where to look. Between Waterfoot village and Red Bay Pier there are spectacular red sandstone caves eroded by the sea. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, remote areas like the Antrim Coast & Glens had no teachers and the National School system had not yet started, so children were taught by learned men who set themselves up as 'hedge teachers'. One of these caves was used as a schoolroom and among its students was Dr James McConnell. He was the co-founder of the Belfast Medical School, which went on to become the world-renowned Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.



# DESIGNATED NATURAL HERITAGE SITES

## RAMSAR site

Garron Plateau is the largest area of intact blanket bog in Northern Ireland. It supports a number of rare and notable plants and animals, including Golden plover, Merlin, Hen harrier and Northern Ireland's only population of Marsh saxifrage. It has been designated a RAMSAR site, a citation which recognises it as a wetland of international importance.

## Special Protection Area

Although they don't know it, the 250,000 nesting seabirds on Rathlin occupy a very significant place of sanctuary. It is only one of two Special Protection Areas within the Antrim Coast & Glens AONB, and as such, it enjoys European-level protection for its importance as a breeding place for seabirds. The red listed Hen harriers of the Antrim Hills have also been afforded the same protection to safeguard this threatened raptor.

## Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

The term 'Special Areas of Conservation' is applied to animals, plants and habitats of international importance that are under serious threat and that have been given greater protection under European legislation. Antrim Coast & Glens AONB has five SACs:

- Garron Plateau — intact blanket bog
- Rathlin Island — breeding place for seabirds
- Breen Wood — one of the best examples of old sessile oak woods in Northern Ireland
- Red Bay — underwater sandbanks
- The Maidens — underwater sandbanks and reefs



Antrim Hills ©Richard Donaghey

## Other sites of interest

In addition, five sites within Antrim Coast & Glens AONB have been designated as Nature Reserves and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has assigned the term Areas of Special Scientific Interest to 37 other sites.

A further two marine sites have been protected as Marine Conservation Zones:

Rathlin MCZ - Deep-sea bed, Black guillemot and Geological/geomorphological features indicating past change in relative sea level

Waterfoot MCZ - Seagrass (*Zostera marina*) bed on Subtidal (sublittoral) sand

These designations demonstrate the importance of the area both nationally and internationally.

## THE NINE GLENS OF ANTRIM

Like many other sites within the AONB, the place names are derived from Irish and often provide a link with how the area was used in the past. Roughly translated they mean the following:

<b>Glenarm</b>	Glen of the army
<b>Glencloy</b>	Glen of the hedges
<b>Glenariff</b>	The arable glen
<b>Glenballyeamon</b>	Edward's town glen
<b>Glenaan</b>	The glen of the colt's foot
<b>Glencorp</b>	Glen of the slaughtered
<b>Glendun</b>	Glen of the brown river
<b>Glenshesk</b>	Glen of the reeds or sedges
<b>Glentaisie</b>	Glen of the Princess Taisie of the bright sides

# Antrim Coast and Glens

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

## Key:

- Land over 240m
- Woodland
- Causeway Coastal Route
- Rail Route
- Alternative Scenic Route
- Roads
- Waymarked Trails
- Sustrains National Cycling Network
- AONB Boundary
- Information
- Parking
- Ferry Crossing
- Railway Station
- Glens Great Grassland Trail
- Short Walks
- Golf
- Glens of Antrim



# ARCHAEOLOGY

## The Ancient Past

The Antrim Coast & Glens AONB has a long settlement history. Archaeologists have uncovered Mesolithic settlements from around 7000BC. Neolithic axe factories from around 4000BC have been discovered at Tievebullagh and at Brockley on the west of Rathlin, where people worked flint and porcellanite into tools and weapons. These were traded around Britain and Ireland, with some discovered as far away as Greece. Tombs are widespread, such as Caranmore passage tomb near Torr Head.

Sites from the Bronze Age (2500-500BC) lie scattered over the landscape. Knockdhu fort consists of a series of massive earthworks, with three banks and ditches running for 300 metres, revealing the work of a sophisticated society.

Lurigethan mountain, which towers over Cushendall, hosts one of the most spectacularly situated Iron Age (300BC – 400AD) promontory forts in Ireland. It encloses 12 hectares of the mountain with a series of banks and ditches and contains the remains of what are thought to be sunken houses.

## Early Christian to Early Modern Ireland

In the Early Christian period nobles lived in fortified dwellings called raths and cashels, such as Altagore Cashel near Cushendun.

During the medieval period monuments such as Bonamargy Friary and Bruce's Castle on Rathlin Island were built. Ballygally Castle was built in Scottish baronial style in 1625 by James Shaw, a Scot who had come to Ireland in 1606 to find his fortune. The castle has its own 'Ghost Room' in one of the top corner turrets, overlooking the Irish Sea.



# HOW TO GET THERE AND HOW TO GET AROUND

The Antrim Coats and Glens AONB is situated in the north eastern corner of Northern Ireland and within one hour's drive from Belfast International, George Best Belfast City and City of Derry airports. Ferry access is available to Larne and Belfast from Scotland and there is also a ferry service between Ballycastle and Rathlin island.

Ballymena, Ballymoney and Larne are part of the Northern Ireland rail network and the AONB is accessible by bus from each of these towns. In summer the Antrim Coaster bus service operates regularly between Larne and Ballycastle. Cyclists can use the Sustrans national Cycle Routes 93 and 97.

For walkers the AONB includes the Moyle Way running from Ballycastle to Glenariff Forest Park and the Antrim Hills Way running from Glenarm to Slemish Mountain. For more information on the Waymarked Ways in Northern Ireland please visit [www.walkni.com](http://www.walkni.com).

The Causeway Coastal Route covers the eighty miles of coastline across two counties and passes through two other Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Dalriada Festival, Glenarm Castle ©Tourism NI



# SEE AND DO

## Get out and about

The Antrim Coast & Glens AONB is packed with wonderful sights to see and amazing activities. Here are just some of the things you can enjoy when you're out and about.

- Visit a forest - there are plenty to choose from, including Glenariff Forest Park, Straidkilly, Glenarm and Ballypatrick. Keep your eyes open - you might spot a Red squirrel.
- Drive the Causeway Coast Road and be sure to take the optional route to Torr Head. Be aware that the road is extremely narrow and travels along precariously high cliffs. But you will be richly rewarded by the rugged coastline and stunning views over to the Mull of Kintyre, the Scottish isles of Jura and Islay and the peaks of Arran.
- Take the ferry from Ballycastle to Rathlin Island and join the 20,000 other visitors who go there every year to see its stunning array of bird life.
- Put on your hiking boots and follow one of the many waymarked paths that take you into the heart of this beautiful region.
- If you are a taphophile, that is, if you have an interest in old cemeteries, then the Antrim Coast + Glens AONB is a delight, with many old churchyards with headstones dating back to the seventeenth century. The Laid Church outside Cushendall is a fine example.
- Try something new - sailing, fishing, photography, rock climbing, horse-riding, there are countless opportunities.



Grey seals ©Geoff Campbell

# LEAVE NO TRACE



In order to minimise your social and environmental impacts on the outdoors, please follow the principles of Leave no Trace. Leave No Trace is an outdoor ethics educational programme designed to promote and inspire responsible outdoor recreation through education, research and partnerships.

Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust supports the 7 principles of Leave No Trace:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Be Considerate of Others
3. Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife
4. Travel and Camp on Durable Ground. (only in designated camping areas)
5. Leave What You Find
6. Dispose of Waste Properly
7. Minimise the Effects of Fire

For more information please visit:

[www.leavenotraceireland.org](http://www.leavenotraceireland.org)

Practising a Leave No Trace ethic is very simple:

Make it hard for others to see or hear you and **LEAVE NO TRACE** of your visit.



Cushendun ©Tourism NI

## VISITOR INFORMATION

For further information on where to stay,  
places to visit or things to do contact:

### **Ballymena Visitor Information Centre “The Braid”**

The Braid Ballymena Town Hall

Museum & Arts Centre

1-29 Bridge Street, Ballymena

BT43 5EJ

T: **(028) 2563 5010**

W: **[www.midandeastantrimtourism.gov.uk](http://www.midandeastantrimtourism.gov.uk)**

### **Book Nook**

96c Main Street

Larne

BT40 1RE

T: **(028) 2826 0395**

W: **[www.midandeastantrimtourism.gov.uk](http://www.midandeastantrimtourism.gov.uk)**

### **Ballycastle Visitor Information Centre**

Portnagree House Harbour and Marina

14 Bayview Road

Ballycastle

BT54 6BT

T: **(028) 2076 2024**

W: **[www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com](http://www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com)**

### **Tourism NI**

Linum Chambers

Bedford Square, Bedford Street

Belfast

BT2 7ES

T: **(028) 9023 1221**

W: **[www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com)**

### **Cushendall Local Information Office**

Old School House, Cushendall

BT44 0RR

T: **(028) 2177 1180**

W: **[www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com](http://www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com)**



Ballygally Castle ©Tourism NI

### **Ballymoney Visitor Information Centre**

Town Hall, 1 Townhead Street

Ballymoney

BT53 6BE

T: **(028) 2766 0230**

W: **[www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com](http://www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com)**

### **Visit Glenarm Tourism**

17 New Road

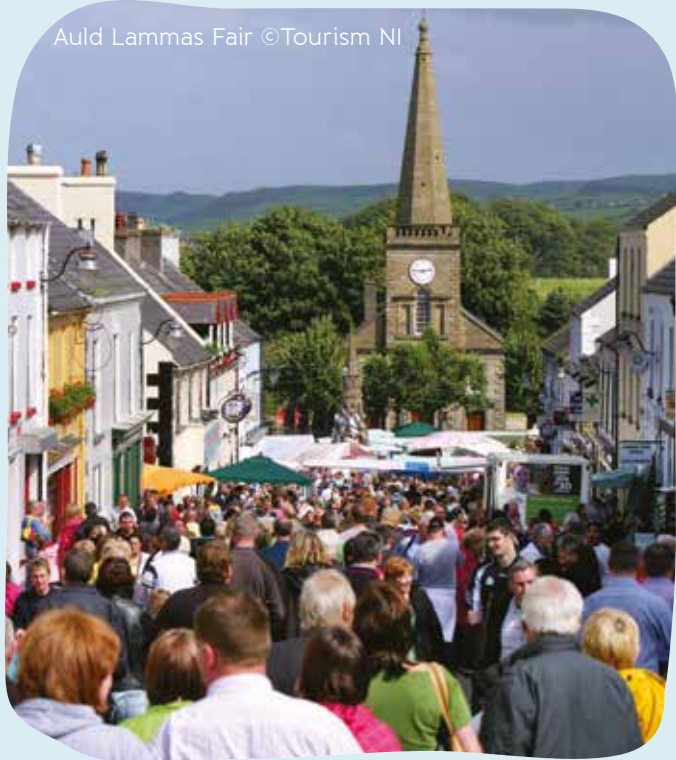
Glenarm

BT44 0AP

T: **(028) 2844 1087**

W: **[www.glenarmtourism.org](http://www.glenarmtourism.org)**

Auld Lammas Fair ©Tourism NI







Antrim Coast Road ©Tourism NI

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on the  
Antrim Coast and Glens Area of  
Outstanding Natural Beauty contact:

### Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust

The Old Bank  
27 Main Street  
Armoy  
Co. Antrim  
BT53 8SL

T: **(028) 2075 2100**

E: **info@ccght.org**

Visit our website - **www.ccght.org** or  
find us on **Facebook** and **Twitter**



### Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Klondyke Building, Cromac Ave,  
Gasworks Business Park,  
Lower Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT7 2JA  
T: **0300 200 7856**

Visit our website - **www.daera-ni.gov.uk**

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Rue Lighthouse, Rathlin Island ©Tourism NI



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