

Binevenagh

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Binevenagh

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

A place of pristine beauty

Welcome to Binevenagh AONB. This region has some of the most beautiful and varied scenery in Northern Ireland – a high upland plateau, dramatic cliffs, pristine dune systems and long, sweeping beaches. By exploring its rich natural, cultural and built heritage, you will discover the many distinctive features that combine to make Binevenagh AONB's unique character.

The landscapes of Binevenagh are of national importance and in 2006 it was recognised as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This was a re-designation and extension of the North Derry AONB, designated in 1966.

The award of AONB status is designed to preserve and enhance this wonderful area so that it can be enjoyed by present and future generations.



Mussenden Temple ©Tourism NI



Binevenagh AONB

So much to see and do

This leaflet will help you to explore Binevenagh AONB. The area encompasses some of the most stunning scenery and landscapes in Northern Ireland. At its centre is the dominant escarpment of Binevenagh. Its steep sides are covered by rocky crags, scree slopes and a patch work of forestry plantations, deciduous woodland, grassland and heath – environments which support a diversity of wildlife. Feral goats and Irish stoats roam these crags and woods, while Buzzards, Kestrels and Hen harriers patrol the skies. Binevenagh Mountain's dramatic cliffs mark the western extremity of the Antrim Plateau and below lies a superb system of dunes and beaches that stretch from Portstewart to Lough Foyle. The AONB stretches beyond this to Ball's Point at the mouth of the River Roe. In the distance, across Lough Foyle, lies the Inishowen Peninsula of County Donegal.

The mudflats and agricultural hinterland of Lough Foyle support a profusion of wildlife. In autumn, over 35,000 birds arrive from the Arctic region and spend the winter feeding on the wealth of food available – worms, shellfish and eelgrass of the mudflats, plentiful fish in the Lough and graze on extensive turf lawns and flat agricultural land. These include around 3,000 Brent geese from Arctic Canada and internationally important populations of Whooper swans and Bar-tailed godwits.

The flat plain which stretches from the foot of the mountain to the shore creates some of the most productive arable farmland in Northern Ireland. This land has proven rich in other ways too. In 1896, it yielded the Brighter Gold Hoard consisting of necklaces, a torc, a collar and miniature boat complete with oars. It has been described as '...the greatest gold hoard in Ireland.'



Atlantic salmon ©Hans-Petter Fjeld

NATURAL HERITAGE

High and mighty

Rising to 385 metres, the table-top plateau of Binevenagh dominates the landscape here. It has been designated as both a Special Area of Conservation and an Area of Special Scientific Interest. Some areas on its upper surface form an important raised bog which supports many rare bog plants and mosses, such as *Sphagnum imbricatum*.

The wet flanks of the mountain are home to an important and diverse range of grasses, rushes and sedges and in summer the mountain is swathed in the pure white of Bog cotton, the distinct purple blooms of Bell heather and the yellow star like flowers of Bog asphodel. The special habitats on Binevenagh support a range of rare Arctic-alpine plants, such as Purpler saxifrage, Moss campion and the evergreen, Juniper.

Foundations of Binevenagh

The layers of basalt rock that form Binevenagh were laid down some 60-65 million years ago, the same time as the Giant's Causeway. Massive outpourings of molten rock called lava gradually cooled in a series of flows. These can clearly be seen as distinct bands in the rock. There are huge areas of slippage at the western end of the cliffs. These were caused by ice action towards the end of the last glaciation. The softer clays and chalk below the basalt were cut away and when the ice melted around 12,000 years ago there was nothing to support the basalt above and slumped down to its present position.



Otters ©Christine Matthews (cc-by-sa/2.0)



Bann Estuary ©Richard Donaghey

Sand and sea

Magilligan has been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). This beautiful area contains one of the largest and best conserved dune systems in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The Council-owned section of dunes at Benone contains a well maintained Local Nature Reserve, with boardwalks providing access through the dunes.

The many different habitats in the sand dunes support a wide variety of birds. Meadow pipits and Skylarks nest in grassy tussocks while Stonechats and Whitethroats nest in patches of scrub. Ringed plovers nest on the sandy shores amongst the shingle and in winter they are often joined by Sanderlings, Dunlin and Oystercatchers.

You may even be lucky and see a Peregrine falcon hunting its prey. Peregrines nest on the cliffs in spring/early summer. And be careful where you walk - the sand dunes support a population of Ireland's only native reptile, the Common lizard.

Mud glorious mud

Wide and shallow, bordered by mudflat, saltwater marsh and polder, Lough Foyle is a magnet for many overwintering birds. At low tide the vast mud flats provide a banquet of small intertidal animals such as lugworm, shrimps, ragworm and periwinkles for birds such as Bar-tailed godwits, Curlews and Oystercatchers. There are also large areas of eel grass favoured by the Brent geese. If you are lucky, you may spot an Otter. In recognition of its international importance to birds, Lough Foyle's mudflats have been designated a RAMSAR site and Special Protection Area. The waters of Lough Foyle are home to many important fish species, including Allis shad, Twaite shad, Smelt and the Sea lamprey.



Lough Foyle ©Graham McElwaine



Primrose ©Richard Donaghey

Down to the river

The rivers Lower Bann, Curly and Roe traverse this region. The Lower Bann is especially important for eels - they arrive as small transparent elvers, or glass eels, having crossed almost 5,000km of the Atlantic Ocean from the Sargasso Sea. They then make the hazardous journey up stream to Lough Neagh, where they spend the next 11 to 14 years. The rich fish life of the Bann Estuary supports diving birds in winter such as Goldeneye and Red-breasted mergansers.

The River Roe is noted for its Atlantic salmon and Sea trout, and its upper headlands are important spawning grounds for both species. October sees the run of salmon as they head up towards their spawning beds having spent at least one winter at sea.

Agriculture and wildlife

Agriculture expanded rapidly in this region throughout the nineteenth century, facilitated by the spread of new farming techniques and machinery, and the expansion of fertile farmland as more ground was reclaimed from the sea. The network of open drainage ditches that criss-cross the farmland are a wonderful place to spot rare waders, as well as Little egrets and Greenshank.



Whooper swans ©Geoff Campbell



Scarce crimson & gold ©Geoff Campbell

SEE AND DO

Get out and about

You can take part in a wide range of activities in and around Binevenagh AONB:

- Walking – there are many wonderful walks through the glorious countryside of Binevenagh AONB, why not walk the North Sperrins Way?
- Cycling – the Sustrans National Cycle Network traverses the Binevenagh AONB, revealing hidden delights and lovely sights
- Swimming – Benone Strand has over 11 kilometres of golden sands, stretching from Downhill to Magilligan Strand and is a popular spot for all who love swimming and watersports
- Gliding – the gliding club near Bellarena offers you the chance to view the AONB from the air
- Visit historic sites such as Downhill Demesne or Hezlett House
- Check out the thousands of wintering birds along Lough Foyle
- Stroll through the dune system at Benone Nature Reserve and see how many different species of plants and animals you can record
- Try something new – surfing, fishing, photography, golf, horse-riding and many other opportunities



Downhill House ©Jean Smith

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Downhill Demesne and Mussenden Temple

Sitting atop the cliffs at Downhill, overlooking the ocean and flanked by Castlerock village on one side and Downhill on the other, is Downhill House. It was designed and built by an eighteenth-century eccentric, Frederick Hervey, Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry. What started off as his holiday home grew over the years as he sent back ever more art and artefacts from his journeys to continental Europe. At its peak in the 1790s, Downhill contained works by Rembrandt, Rafael, Titian, Durer and Caravaggio, artists whose work can only be seen in major galleries today.

Much of the building was destroyed by fire in 1851 before being rebuilt in the 1870s. It fell into disrepair after the Second World War and today only its ruins remain. Beautiful walks past them take you to Mussenden Temple, a perfect classical rotunda perched perilously close to the cliff edge; inspired by the Temple of Vesta in Rome. It is said that Hervey wanted to transport the original back from Rome, but the Pope refused to sell. Once ornately decorated inside, Hervey used it as a cliff-top library. A strong believer in religious tolerance and equality he had a room built underneath the Temple where Catholic priests could say Mass.

The site of Downhill Demesne and Mussenden Temple is owned by the National Trust and is open to visitors.

Hezlett House

Hezlett House outside Castlerock, is a beautiful thatched cottage dating from around 1691. Not only is it Northern Ireland's oldest surviving thatched cottage, its roughcast walls hide a fascinating early frame of curved timbers called 'crucks'. The cottage was probably built as a parsonage for the rector of Dunboe and was taken over by a Presbyterian farmer, Isaac Hezlett, in 1761. His family lived there until the National Trust acquired the property in 1976.



Martello Tower

Walking through the dynamic sand dunes at Magilligan Point one feature stands out in this otherwise natural environment. The Martello Tower is a lasting reminder of the Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This excellent example from 1812 is one of 74 built in Ireland towards the end of the wars. Designed to house an officer and 12 men, it originally had a 24-pounder cannon mounted on top to protect the entrance to Lough Foyle from a French naval attack. The tower was built over a spring to ensure a supply of fresh water in case of a siege. A similar tower stands derelict in Greencastle, on the other side of Lough Foyle.

Magilligan has always held strategic significance. During the Second World War, the level land around Lough Foyle was ideal for air force bases and the Lough's well-sheltered natural harbour formed a vital base for convoys and escort ships waiting to cross the Atlantic. Lough Foyle became the major focus for waging the Battle of the Atlantic, a fact emphasised by the selection of Lisahally, at the mouth of the River Foyle, as the point to which the German U-boat fleet reported to surrender in 1945.

Castlerock

The Belfast and Ulster Towns Directory for 1910 describes Castlerock as '...a pretty little seaside village with a population of 145'. Over a century later it is still a pretty place, although its population has grown considerably. The village owes its existence largely to the development of the railways. In 1853 the Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine Railway Company opened a line between these two towns. It was a major engineering achievement, requiring tunnels to be cut through two headlands on the route between Castlerock and Downhill – they are still the longest railway tunnels in Ireland, measuring 610 and 280 metres respectively. Travel writer Michael Palin described the train journey between Londonderry and Coleraine as “one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world”.



Broighter Gold Hoard ©Ardfern

HISTORY AND MYSTERY

Mesolithic lifestyle

Binevenagh AONB has been settled since Mesolithic times with the oldest settlement in Ireland, Mountsandel, lying just outside the area, dating from 9,000-10,000 years ago. There have been numerous archaeological excavations around the Foyle and Bann estuaries. Finds at Grangemore include a dug-out canoe, beads and bronze age pins. Other places of note include Ballywildrick standing stone and Bronze Age cairns on Binevenagh and at Ballyhanna.

Bronze Age

Near Largantea, along the Windyhill Road, is a Bronze Age wedge tomb known as the Well Glass Spring Cairn dating from around 2,500 to 2,000 BC. First excavated in 1936, it was found to contain three chambers. The first contained sherds of Beaker pottery and a flint scraper; the second had more pottery and the remains of six adults, a child of about 12 years and an infant; the third chamber had some pottery sherds, charcoal and some bones.

Also nearby is the 'Giant's Sconce' at Sconce Hill. This was an Iron Age hilltop enclosure with uninterrupted views over much of the local landscape. It is reputed to be Dun Cethern, the fortress of Cethern, the son of Finton, one of the Red Branch Knights and a friend of the ancient Ulster hero, Cuchullain. In its heyday the walls of this citadel were 5-8 metres thick with passages inside.





Saints and scholars

One of the greatest Saints to emerge after the death of St. Patrick in the middle of the 5th century was St. Colmcille. He was a member of a high-born clan from Gartán in Donegal and had strong ties with the Binevenagh area. In his youth Colmcille was a frequent visitor to St. Patrick's church at Duncrun near Magilligan. He later exiled himself from Ireland vowing never to set foot there again and established a monastic settlement on the Scottish island of Iona.

St. Aidan's Church, near Bellarena, occupies a site of historic interest as a place of Druidic worship. St. Aidan rose to fame as a great Saint of Lindisfarne and when he died, St. Colman brought some of his remains back and deposited them in a stone cairn. The cairn was near the site of a holy well of the Druids which is believed to be capable of curing illnesses, if certain procedures are followed.

Murder and mayhem

In the past the inland route from Coleraine to Limavady went via the ominously named Murder Hole Road and three hundred years ago it was the haunt of highwaymen. Many travellers simply disappeared, victims of the highwaymen, and their unmarked graves are said to lie along the lonely mountain top. The most infamous robber on this mountain was Cushy Glen who operated here from 1798 to 1804. Small, heavy set, his face disfigured by smallpox scars, Cushy would lie in wait for his victims as they made their way over the lonely mountain road and attack them from behind with a knife.



Magilligan Point ©Tourism NI



HOW TO GET THERE AND HOW TO GET AROUND

Situated on the North West coast of Northern Ireland, Binevenagh AONB is well connected by land, sea and air. To the West, Derry/Londonderry is just 30 minutes' drive and the City of Derry airport is even closer. Visitors arriving at either George Best Belfast City or Belfast International Airport can travel there in just over an hour. A seasonal ferry service connects Magilligan with Greencastle in County Donegal.

The area is well serviced by rail with the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry route running through the area with stops at Bellarena, Castlerock and Coleraine. Regular bus services operate through the AONB from both Coleraine and Limavady. Part of the Causeway Coastal Route follows the A2 around the coast while the A37 connects the main towns of Coleraine and Limavady. Cyclists can alternatively use the Sustrans National Cycle Network (Route 93) whilst walkers can enjoy the waymarked trails of the Ulster Way, North Sperrins Way and Appalachian Trail which traverse Binevenagh.

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

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.

VISITOR INFORMATION

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

Benone Visitor Centre (seasonal opening)

53 Benone Ave

Limavady

Co. Londonderry

BT49 0LQ

T: **(028) 7775 0555**

W: **www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com**

Castlerock Community Association (seasonal opening)

Community & Visitor Information Centre

Circular Road

Castlerock

Co. Londonderry

BT51 4XA

T: **(028) 7084 9303**

Coleraine Visitor Information Centre

Coleraine Town Hall

35 The Diamond

Coleraine

BT52 1DE

T: **(028) 7034 4723**

W: **www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com**

Limavady Visitor Information Centre

Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre

24 Main Street

Limavady

Co. Londonderry

BT49 0FJ

T: **(028) 7776 0650**

W: **www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com**

Tourism NI

Linum Chambers

Bedford Square

Bedford Street

Belfast

BT2 7ES

T: **(028) 9023 1221**

W: **www.discovernorthernireland.com**

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on the
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Visit our website - www.ccght.org or
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Visit our website - www.daera-ni.gov.uk

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