

Causeway Coast

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Causeway Coast

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

A place of national importance

Welcome to the Causeway Coast AONB. This region has some of the most beautiful and varied scenery in Northern Ireland, from pristine dune systems to dramatic cliffs with alternating layers of black basalt and white limestone. As well as exploring its natural, cultural and built heritage, you will be able to discover the many intriguing geological features that give the Causeway Coast its distinctive character.

The special landscapes that make up the Causeway Coast are of national importance and in 1989 it was 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.

Meadow crane's-bill © Geoff Campbell





NATURAL HERITAGE

Causeway Coast AONB

An astonishing variety of landscapes and wildlife

This leaflet will help you to explore the Causeway Coast AONB which extends for 30km along the North Antrim Coast, from Ballycastle and continuing west to Portrush. The Causeway Coast AONB encompasses some of the most stunning scenery and landscapes in Northern Ireland, including the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site.

The eastern fringe of the AONB to the west of Ballycastle is characterised by sheer sea cliffs and rough grassland. Long lines of dry-stone walls criss-cross this area, built using the loose boulders laid down by the vast ice sheet that covered this entire area 21,000-11,500 years ago. Further west is one of Northern Ireland's most popular, and nail biting, attractions – the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge. Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Razorbills breed on the cliffs and islands close to the rope bridge, and on a warm day it is possible to smell them too!

Dark green fritillary © Richard Donaghey





Whiterocks Beach ©TourismNI

Three miles of beach

The landscape mellows into an important dune system at White Park Bay. This spectacular sandy beach forms a white arc between two headlands, with the tiny fishing port of Portbraddan at one end of the beach and the naturally sculpted rocks of Ballintoy Harbour at the other. The dunes, backed by high basalt and limestone cliffs, provide a rich habitat for flora and fauna. Keep an eye out for fossils in the limestone.

Continuing west, a series of small rocky bays and headlands lead on to the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site. The distinctive columns of five and six-sided basalt rock were formed some 60 million years ago when this area experiences intense volcanic activity. Approaching the historic village of Bushmills, the landscape softens around the valley of the River Bush and the wild coastal landscape gives way to mixed farmland and deciduous woods. The village was designated as a conservation area in 1991 and has over 90 listed buildings including shops and houses. It is also home to the famous Bushmills Distillery, reputed to be the oldest licenced distillery in the world (1608).

History in stone

Approaching the large seaside town of Portrush, the awe-inspiring sight of Dunluce Castle comes into view. It's hard to imagine a more spectacular site for a castle, set high on a rocky promontory jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean, with waves crashing into the cliffs 35 metres below. The castle ruins are breath-taking, and they still convey an immense sense of power.



White Park Bay ©TourismNI



DESIGNATED NATURAL HERITAGE SITES

Protecting places of beauty and value

Although only a compact area of only 42 km², Causeway Coast AONB is home to a number of important landscapes rich in biodiversity, some of which have been designated to provide recognition and protection.

World Heritage Site (WHS)

The Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site was designated in 1986 and is the most internationally renowned site in the AONB. The UNESCO WHS designation recognises the spectacular geology which holds international importance. It is Northern Ireland's only World Heritage Site.

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

The term 'Special Area 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. The North Antrim Coast SAC has been designated because of its important vegetated sea cliffs and Northern Ireland's only population of Narrow-mouthed whorl snail. The Skerries and Causeway Marine SAC has been designated for its underwater sandbank, reef and sea cave habitats and as an important area for Harbour porpoise.

Special Protection Area (SPA)

The designation SPA affords a European level of protection on an area with international importance for breeding, over wintering or migrating birds. Sheep Island, off the coast of Ballintoy, has been granted this status in recognition of its role as a nationally important breeding site for Cormorants.



Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge ©TourismNI

Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)

The ASSI designation provides statutory protection for the best examples of the region's flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features and to sites that make a considerable contribution to the conservation of our most valuable natural places. There are nine ASSIs within the Causeway Coast AONB:

- Whiterocks
- White Park Bay
- Runkerry
- Giant's Causeway and Dunseverick
- Portballintrae
- Sheep Island
- Carrick-a-Rede
- Ramore Head and The Skerries
- Castle Point

National Nature Reserve (NNR)

National Nature Reserves are managed specifically to conserve nature and to promote education and research. The Giant's Causeway NNR is designated for its coastal cliffs, columnar basalt and salt marsh.



Giant's Causeway ©TourismNI

GEOLOGY

A complex rock structure

The Causeway Coast AONB comprises of a wide variety of rocks and landscapes. Some of the oldest rocks, at Portrush and White Park Bay for example, date back 135-190 million years to the Jurassic period. The distinctive white limestone that can be seen on many cliff faces was laid down around 65-135 million years ago in the Cretaceous era. Capping these are the dark, hard volcanic basalts from 60-65 million years ago.

These 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 near Limavady. In fact, there were three outpourings of lava, known as the Lower, Middle and Upper Basalts. In many places a layer of weathered basalt called laterite marking the boundary between the basalt layers. Red in colour due to its iron content, the presence of laterite indicates there were long periods of inactivity between each outpouring of lava.

The Giant's Causeway

This world-famous site is enjoyed by over one million visitors each year. It is made up of some 40,000 vertical or gently inclined columns, the majority of which are seven, six or five-sided, with a few that are four or eight-sided. This remarkable natural phenomenon was created when molten basalt cooled and contracted slowly and at an even rate across a large area. This very ordered fracturing in the rock sheet produced the remarkably consistent columns seen at the Giant's Causeway.

The Giant's Causeway isn't all just rocks but has a range of habitats including seashore, marsh and grassland which support some 50 species of birds and more than 200 plant species.



FLORA AND FAUNA

On land, in sea and air

The Causeway Coast AONB contains a diverse range of landscapes and habitats, including islands and sea cliffs, sand dunes, grassland and saltmarsh, plus coastal and marine areas and farmed countryside, all of which support a rich and fascinating variety of wildlife.

Marine life

The turbulent, oxygen-rich coastal waters support many small organisms and fish which attract feeding seabirds, whales, dolphins and porpoises. The Common and Grey seal can both be seen around the coast and the huge and harmless Basking shark is an occasional summer visitor. It swims slowly, close to the surface, filtering tiny plankton from the water through its enormous wide-open jaws. Other marine life of the Causeway Coast includes sponges, sea squirts, sand eels, crabs, scallops, small fish, and sea anemones. Wrasse, Pollock, Dogfish and Conger eel can be found close to shore along the rocky coast and if you are very lucky, you may spot an otter.

Eider © Tom McDonnell





Wildlife watching ©Richard Donaghey

Bird life

Many seabirds nest on the rugged cliffs and offshore islands of the Causeway Coast, feeding in the rich waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the North Channel. These include Fulmars, Black guillemots, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Cormorants and Eider ducks.

The rocky shores support a wide variety of birds including Ringed plover, Turnstone, Purple sandpiper and Oystercatcher. A streak of blue may indicate a colourful Kingfisher darting rapidly across the River Bush or watch out for the bobbing brown and white Dipper.

The Causeway cliffs are home to Peregrine falcons and Ravens. The Peregrine falcon, the fastest and fiercest bird of these cliffs, hunts other birds, plunging down to snatch them at speeds of up to 200mph.

Sand dunes

Sand dunes offer one of the toughest environments for plants to survive yet marram grass thrives in this dry, nutrient-poor and abrasive habitat. Strong yet flexible, it is the anchor that holds the dunes in place putting down deep roots that bind the loose sand. Marram grass can be weakened when undercut by waves and too much human trampling can also damage it. Wild thyme, Meadow cranebill, and Eyebright grow within the dunes as well as a variety of beautiful orchid species. The rich diversity of wildflowers supports a wide range of insects including the colourful Dark-green fritillary butterfly, Cinnabar moth and the White-tailed bumblebee.

Yellow flowering Common gorse, or Whin, is commonly found along the exposed cliff tops and provides shelter for small mammals like the Pygmy shrew. Northern Ireland's only native reptile, the Common lizard, can be spotted on warm sunny days across the AONB.



BUILT HERITAGE

Castles and commerce

Dunluce Castle

Dunluce Castle is one of the best-known historic monuments in Northern Ireland. Its history goes back to the medieval period and by the 1500s it was held by the McQuillans. They were forced out in the 1560s by the powerful MacDonnell clan under their formidable leader Sorley Boy MacDonnell.

Recent excavations near the castle have unearthed the 'lost town of Dunluce'. A once prosperous settlement, established around 1607, it was inhabited exclusively by merchants from Scotland. The village was burned to the ground in 1641 but what remains is amongst the best preserved seventeenth-century archaeology in Ireland.

Dunseverick Castle

Set on a wind-swept promontory, Dunseverick castle has a history that goes back to the 5th century and it has changed ownership and been rebuilt many times down the years. None other than St. Patrick himself visited it on several occasions and in 870 it was attacked by Vikings. Destroyed by English forces in 1641, it has been in ruins ever since.

Bushmills

The name Bushmills is synonymous with the Old Bushmills Distillery and uisce beatha, Irish for 'water of life', meaning whiskey. Whiskey has been produced here since a Royal licence was granted in 1608. The River Bush runs through the centre of Bushmills. Mills once lined its banks and were used to make products such as corn, flax, spades and of course whiskey. Guided tours of the Old Bushmills Distillery reveal the 400-year old secret of the 'water of life' with a chance to sample a dram of the finest Irish Whiskey.



Ballintoy

Ballintoy is best-known for its picturesque harbour, built with massive limestone blocks, and for its white church, a landmark along the Causeway Coastal Route. The harbour was once the centre of a thriving fishing industry and in the nineteenth century thousands of tons of cobblestones were shipped from here to pave the streets of Dublin, Belfast and Glasgow. The same limestone that built the harbour walls was burned in two huge lime kilns. Mixed with sand and water, the resulting ash formed a lime mortar which still holds together many of the Causeway Coast AONB's older buildings.

Kinbane Castle

This ruined castle sits on a narrow limestone promontory in a strikingly beautiful location, looking out towards Rathlin Island and beyond that to Scotland. The square tower of the castle is all that remains. According to tradition it was built in the 1540s by Colla MacDonnell, the brother of Sorley Boy MacDonnell. There is a story that a group of besieging English soldiers were once trapped and massacred in the cave under the castle which is still known as the "Hollow of the English".

Kinbane Castle ©Kieran Buckley



Causeway Coast

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Key:

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Woodland | Causeway Coast Way | Golf |
| Causeway Coastal Route | Sustrains National Cycling Network | Parking |
| Railway Station | AONB Boundary | Viewpoint |
| Rail Route | Ferry Crossing | Information |
| | | Beach |



Ballintoy Harbour ©TourismNI

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Ancient settlements, Spanish shipwrecks and tall stories

There is a long history of settlement in the Causeway Coast AONB. At White Park Bay evidence of man dates back to the Neolithic period (4000-2500 BC) with a small circular cairn about 11 metres in diameter, three passage mounds and other finds.

Given its close proximity, the area also has longstanding connections with Scotland. As early as the 5th to 7th 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 language, place names, music and dance.



Dunluce Village Archaeological Dig ©Willie Duffin



Giant's Causeway ©TourismNI

The Girona

The Girona was a large merchant galley of the 1588 Spanish Armada. Having fled from Sir Walter Raleigh's fleet in the English Channel, she made her way north to escape bad weather. Sailing along the North Antrim coast, the ship foundered off Lacada Point near the Giant's Causeway. Thirteen hundred lives were lost, including members of the Spanish aristocracy. There were only nine survivors.

Sorley Boy MacDonnell, living in the nearby Dunluce Castle, quickly recovered three brass cannons and two chests of treasure from the wreck. The cannons can still be seen at Dunluce Castle and many of the lost souls are buried in the St Cuthbert's Church opposite Dunluce.

The wreck of the Girona was discovered on the sea bed in 1967 and many of the items recovered – including a beautiful salamander gold pendant, set with rubies – are held as part of a permanent exhibit at the Ulster Museum in Belfast. The wreck site was designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act on 22 April 1993.

Tall tales of the Giant's Causeway

Legend has it that the Irish giant, Finn McCool built the causeway to walk to Scotland to fight his rival Benandonner but fell asleep before he got to Scotland. When he did not arrive the much larger giant Benandonner crossed the causeway looking for him. To protect Finn, his wife Oonagh laid a blanket over him and pretended that he was their baby son. When Benandonner saw the size of the 'infant', he assumed that Finn must be gigantic indeed and fled home in terror, ripping up the Causeway in case he was followed by Finn.



SEE AND DO

Get out and about

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

- Take a hike - engage first hand with this wonderful coastline and enjoy its unique natural beauty by following the Causeway Coast Way
- Go castle hunting - step back in time at the deeply atmospheric castles of the Causeway Coast AONB - Kinbane, Dunseverick and of course, Dunluce.
- The Giant's Causeway - the modern Visitor Centre brings the whole Causeway experience to life through engaging interpretation and interactive displays.
- Carrick-a-Rede. Test your nerve on this nerve-tingling rope bridge. It's not for the faint hearted but is worth it for the stunning views of the Causeway Coast AONB coastline.
- Search for birds, bees and butterflies in the areas many sand dune systems
- Go looking for fossils among the limestone outcrops at White Park Bay, remembering to leave what you find.
- Try something new - surfing, fishing, photography, coasteering, horse-riding, kayaking and many other opportunities



Bushmills Distillery © TourismNI

HOW TO GET THERE

The Causeway Coast AONB is situated on Northern Ireland's north coast and Belfast International, George Best Belfast City and City of Derry airports are all within one hour's drive.

Ferry access is available to Larne and Belfast from Scotland and again the Causeway Coast AONB is within one hour's drive. Ferry access is also available from Greencastle, Co. Donegal to Magilligan which is less than half an hour's drive from the Causeway Coast AONB.

Portrush and Coleraine are both part of the Northern Ireland rail network. By road it is recommended that visitors approach the AONB from either the east or west using the scenic A2 Causeway Coastal Route.

Within the AONB, Translink offer the excellent 'Causeway Rambler' bus service and in summer there is a regular bus service between Larne and Portrush which follows the Causeway Coastal Route.

Cyclists can use the Sustrans National Cycle Network (Route 93) which passes through the western half of the AONB, whilst walkers can enjoy the waymarked trail of the Causeway Coast Way across the entire AONB.



Peregrine © 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

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.



Northern fulmar © Tom McDonnell

VISITOR INFORMATION

For Further Information on where to stay,
places to visit or things to do contact:

Bushmills Visitor Information Centre (seasonal opening)

Main Street

Bushmills

BT57 8QA

T: (028) 2073 0390

W: www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com

Coleraine Visitor Information Centre

Coleraine Town Hall

35 The Diamond

Coleraine

BT52 1DE

T: (028) 7034 4723

W: www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com

Ballycastle Visitor Information Centre

Portnagree House Harbour and Marina

14 Bayview Road

Ballycastle

BT54 6BT

T: (028) 2076 2024

W: www.visitcausewaycoastandglens.com

Tourism NI

Linum Chambers

Bedford Square

Bedford Street

Belfast

BT2 7ES

T: (028) 9023 1221

W: www.discovernorthernireland.com

Giant's Causeway Visitor Information Centre

44 Causeway Road

Bushmills

BT57 8SU

T: (028) 2073 1855

W: www.giantscausewaytickets.com

Common gorse ©Anne Burgess

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on the
Causeway Coast 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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Whiterocks Beach ©Tourism NI



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