

The Wash

National Nature Reserve

This is one of a range of publications published by: English Nature's Eastern Area Team, The Maltings, Wharf Road, Grantham, NG31 6BH

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The Wash is one of more than 200 National Nature Reserves in England. Such places are among the best wildlife and earth heritage sites in the country and many are important in an international context. English Nature is the government agency which looks after our natural heritage. We promote the conservation of wildlife and natural features through advice, research, and grants. We encourage people to become actively involved in nature conservation and welcome voluntary help on National Nature Reserves.

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The Eastern Area Team leads nature conservation in the East Midland counties of Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland.

Front cover photographs:
Top left: Pink-footed geese.
Wash Wildfowlers
Bottom left: Common seal pup.
Simon Smith
Main: Oystercatcher. Neil Smith



working today
for nature tomorrow

The Wash

National Nature Reserve

Enjoy the fascinating wildlife and dramatic landscape on this coastal reserve of international importance.

With 12% of England draining into it via five rivers, the Wash is the largest estuary and the most important wetland site in the UK.

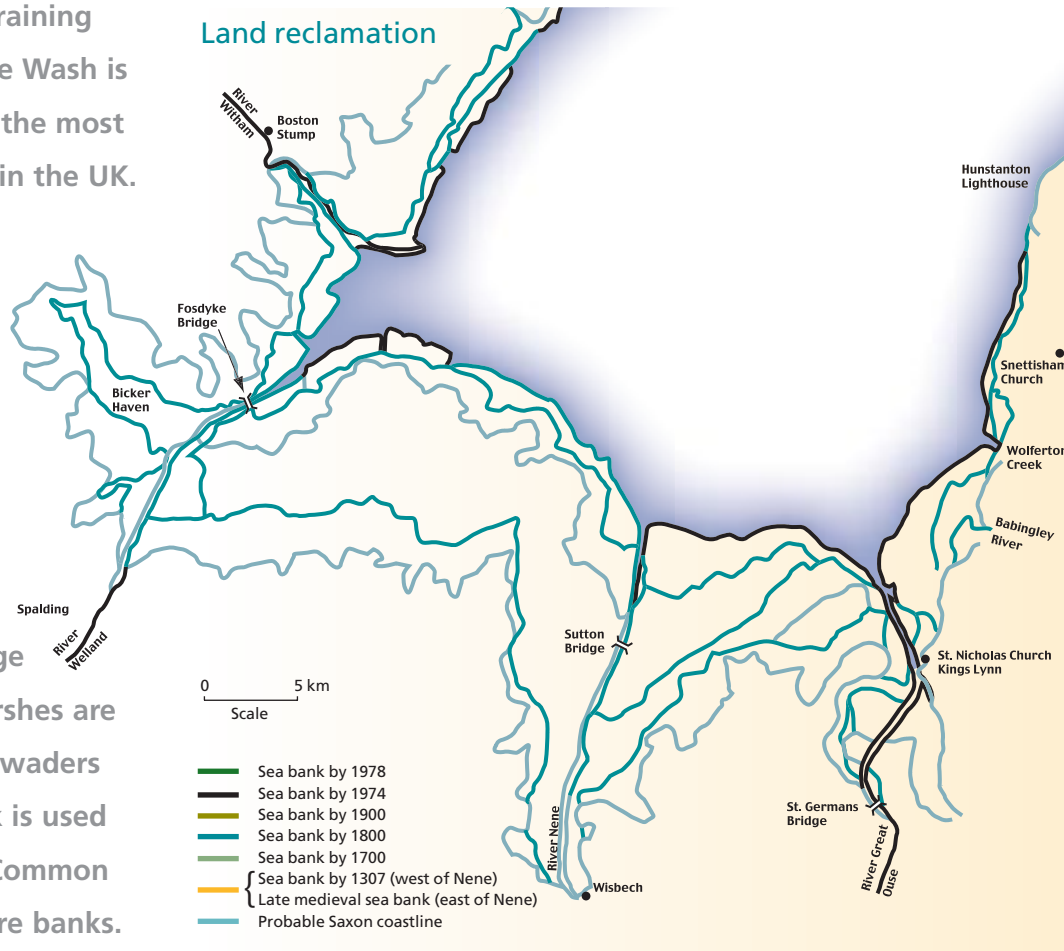
The south east corner of the Wash forms the largest National Nature Reserve in England. This large expanse of mudflats and saltmarsh supports huge numbers of wintering and passage waterfowl. The saltmarshes are important for breeding waders and the outer trial bank is used by breeding seabirds. Common seals inhabit the offshore banks.

History

The Wash that we see today is a remnant of a much larger basin, the Fenland Basin, which stretched back to Peterborough and Cambridge. In the 10th century it was a wild and treacherous place inhabited by a race of people known as the Fenland Tigers due to their ferocious resistance to the Norman invaders. It was in this enormous marsh, legend has it, that King John lost his hoard of riches.



Land reclamation



A living landscape

The Wash and its surroundings have been shaped by man since Roman times. The area has a long history of salt production, drainage and land reclamation for agriculture. The rivers that flowed into the Wash once followed slow, meandering courses, depositing successive layers of silt in their estuaries and along the shores of the Wash. This caused the rivers to frequently flood the surrounding marshland, however, the Romans, medieval monks and finally Dutch engineers straightened the rivers, drained the fens, and built banks to protect the land from further flooding. Up until the 1970s large areas of saltmarsh were enclosed by earth banks and converted into agricultural land and now the Wash is totally enclosed by artificial sea defences.

Man has harvested the seemingly unending bounty of the Wash through fishing and wildfowling, which are still important activities today. The ports, particularly King's Lynn and Boston, were once among the most important in the country and traded furs and timber with the countries around the Baltic Sea.



Outer trial bank

In 1975 there was a proposal to create an offshore freshwater reservoir and the two trial banks from this experiment still dominate the skyline at Terrington Marsh.

The Wash - National Nature Reserve

Saltmarsh






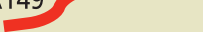



Marsh harrier.
Julian Smith/Artsmith

Saltmarshes are one of the most important natural habitats in the United Kingdom and 10% of the country's saltmarsh are found in the Wash. The saltmarsh is of considerable botanical interest but is particularly vital for migratory birds. The plants offer grazing for wintering birds like brent geese and wigeon and the seeds provide food for flocks of teal, twite and linnet. In summer the marsh offers both feeding and nesting grounds for birds such as redshank, skylark and reed bunting. Saltmarsh also provides valuable high tide roost sites for many birds like curlew, oystercatcher, godwit, knot and dunlin, while the tide covers their feeding grounds further out to sea.

These large flocks of birds attract aerial hunters. Peregrines, merlins and hen harriers are frequent visitors, while short-eared owls and barn owls use the sea wall and saltmarsh as hunting and roosting areas.



Key

- Reserve Boundary 
- Reserve Boundary (over the sea) 
- Coastline 
- Sea Wall 
- A17, A1078, A47, A10, A149, A148 
- Other Roads 
- Public Footpaths 
- Car Park 
- River 





Sea purslane. Simon Cooter

Sand and mud flats

The inter-tidal flats are teeming with life - the Wash is important for the massive numbers of shellfish and other animals that live within the sand and mud. Enormous numbers of migrant wading birds such as grey plover, knot, lapwing, dunlin, oystercatcher and bar-tailed godwit arrive in the autumn to take advantage of this rich feeding ground. The best time to see large flocks of waders is on a rising tide at any time from early September to early May. During this time spectacular numbers of pink-footed geese arrive from Iceland and Greenland and may roost on the offshore banks of the reserve. Brent geese, wigeon, pintail, teal and mallard use the saltmarsh throughout the reserve.

The Wash supports one of the largest populations of common seal. Seal Sands, within the NNR is one of the largest haul out and basking sites.

The Wash also plays an important role as a nursery ground for fish, notably plaice, sole, cod and whiting.



Dunlin in flight. Simon Smith



Cattle grazing. Simon Cooter/English Nature

Management

For centuries the saltmarshes of the Wash have been traditionally grazed with cattle, horses and sheep. However, since the 1960s this has declined, and today, roughly half of the marshes are grazed, mainly by cattle. This management produces areas of short grass that attracts ducks and geese during the winter, and areas of tussocky vegetation favoured by breeding birds like redshank.

Visiting

There are public footpaths along the seawall in the Lutton Outmarsh section of the NNR and between the River Nene and the River Ouse. Due to the hazardous nature of the mudflats and saltmarshes, visitors are advised to stay on the seawall.

Please help look after the site by following the Country Code and, in particular, keep dogs under close control to prevent disturbance to breeding birds and high tide roosts.

More information about the site can be found at the Green Quay, the Wash discovery centre at South Quay, King's Lynn.
Tel: 01553 818500.

Boat trips to see the seals are available daily from Hunstanton during the summer months.



Little egret. Neil Smith



Redshank. Neil Smith

English Nature leases this area from private landowners and the Crown Estate. It manages the land in partnership with local farmers, the Eastern Sea fisheries Joint Committee, who control fishing activity and the local wildfowling clubs, who lease and manage the sporting rights.



Mussels. ESFJC



Brent geese. Neil Smith



Visitors. LCC