



Cover Photograph:

Curlew on Bridgwater Bay'
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Bridgwater Bay

National Nature Reserve

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Where a river meets the sea

Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve is part of the Severn Estuary and includes the mouth of the river Parrett which meanders through the heart of the Somerset Levels. The Reserve's mudflats, sand banks and saltmarshes are nationally and internationally important feeding and roosting sites for waterfowl and wading birds.

Shingle ridges, reed beds, a submerged forest and fossil-bearing beds add further landscape and wildlife diversity to the Reserve.

One of the largest in the world

The Bristol Channel has the second largest tidal range in the world. Incoming tides flood the land twice each day and then drop away to the distant horizon, exposing huge mudflats and sand banks.


Mud, mud glorious mud

Mud may not look very attractive, but it is rich in microscopic animal and plant life and algae. These minute life forms support millions of larger creatures such as shrimps, shellfish and worms, the chief diet of many wading birds and wildfowl.

Feathery comings and goings

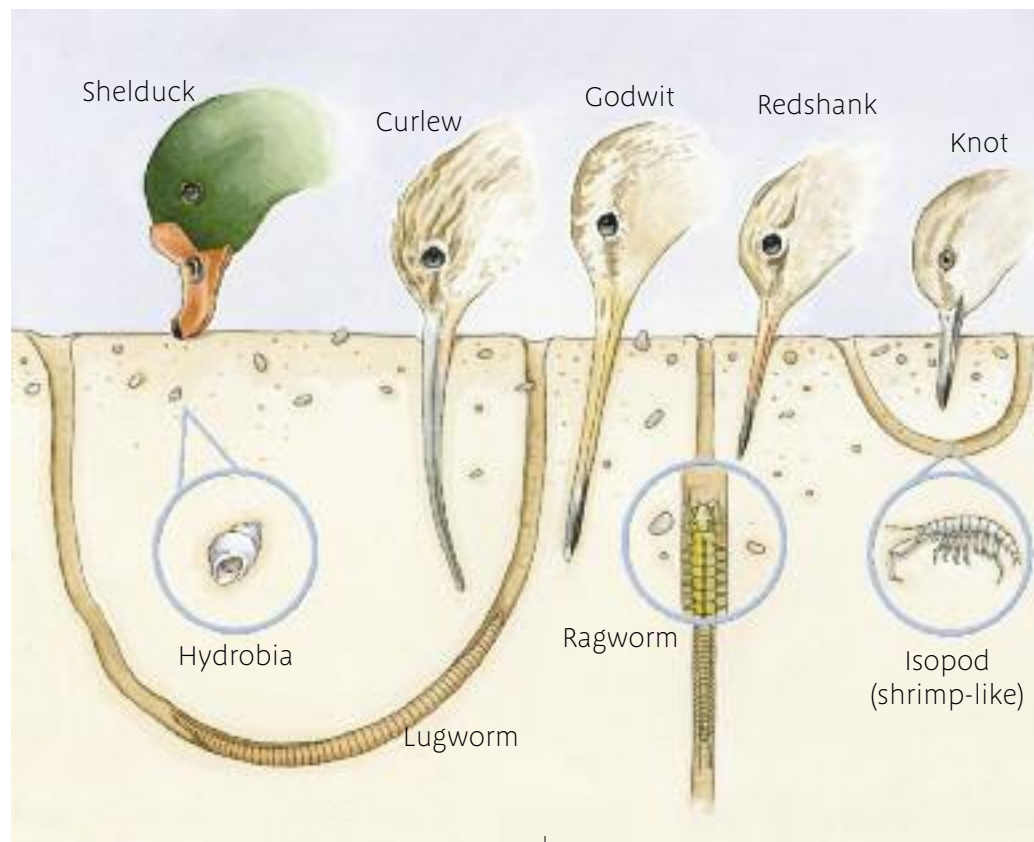
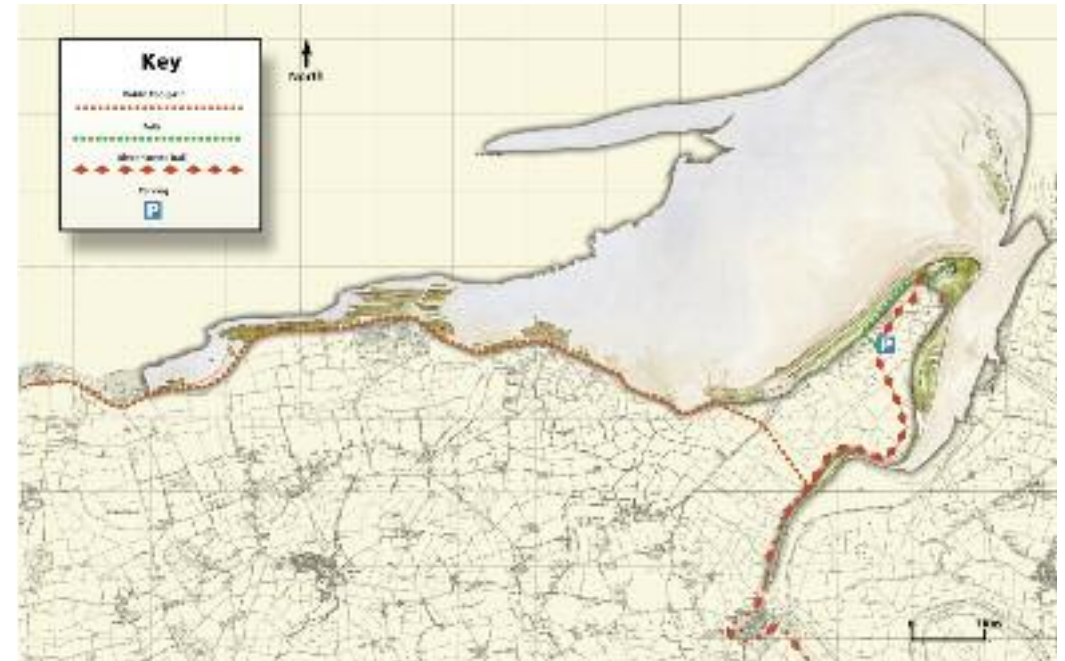
Many wildfowl and wading birds found on the Reserve breed in the far north of Europe during the summer, returning to warmer places in Europe and North Africa in winter. For these migrants the Reserve is a vital stop-off point. Other birds are resident for all

or most of the year. Around 190 bird species have been recorded within the Reserve. Flocks of several thousand birds can be seen at the busiest times of the year.

 *Shelduck, curlew, and oystercatcher which may be seen all year around. Whimbrel on passage in the spring and autumn and birds of prey such as the peregrine which hunts the huge flocks of wintering dunlin.*


Reed beds

Nesting and feeding amongst the tall stalks of common reed are numerous small birds such as the reed and sedge warblers.



Shifting sands

On the edge of the Reserve are several small dune areas - an uncommon feature along the coast of the Bristol Channel. Dunes can easily be damaged by vehicles and trampling feet. Coarse grasses help anchor the sand in place.

 *Lady's bedstraw, restharrow and henbane.*

Common Land

The adjacent common land is also an important conservation area. It is managed by commoners and grazed throughout the summer. As well as rare plant species, skylarks nest here and short-eared owls hunt for small mammals

It's not just a lot of boring grass!

The Reserve contains the largest area of saltmarsh in Somerset. This developed following planting of cord grass in the early 1900's, a pioneering species which traps mud in its leaves. As the marsh is created, other maritime plants spread in swards alongside the reeds. The numerous creeks and ponds are home to sand hoppers, snails and fish fry. In the higher, drier parts are nesting birds such as skylark and meadow pipit.



Part of the saltmarsh is grazed by sheep during the summer which creates a short grass sward that the wigeon eat in the winter.

Saltmarsh is important for humans too. The tough cord grass helps protect the coast and low lying land and properties by binding together the mud and preventing it being washed away.



Glasswort, rock sea lavender and sea-aster

Bright yellow poppies and piles of pebbles

Stretching from the Stert Peninsula towards Hinkley Point is a long shingle ridge. The limestone pebbles come from the cliffs and submerged bedrock further west along the coast. Waves break off chunks of rocks, round them off and then deposit them along the coast during stormy weather. Today, pounding waves only reach the shingle during the heaviest of storms. In places the stable shingle is covered with plants, most notably the yellow horned poppy. You will also find many different lichens and mosses growing on the surface of pebbles.



Shelduck, Robin Prowse, Natural England



Ancient sea monsters and fossil forests

The limestone rocks along this part of the north Somerset coast are Liassic in age (about 160 million years old). This was the time when giant marine reptiles, such as the ichthyosaur and huge spiral-shaped shellfish called ammonites roamed the oceans.

Ammonites (varying sizes from a few centimeters in diameter to over half a metre).



Skylark, Nick Watts, Natural England

At low tide, off the coast between Stolford and Hinkley, you might be able to see a submerged fossil forest - evidence of how sea levels have risen since the last Ice Age (about 10,000 years ago).

Enjoying your visit

Bird-watching

The best time to see bird life on the Reserve is early spring, autumn and winter at times of high water.

Access

Please stick to waymarked paths, leave gates as you find them and observe any site notices.

Dogs

Grazing animals are present throughout the year so dogs must be kept under close control.

Your safety

Do not attempt to walk out to the sea at low tide. Mudflats are very dangerous; you can easily become trapped in soft mud and drowned as the tide rises.

Byelaws

Please refer to the Byelaw panels around the Reserve for full details.

Further Information

For further information, please contact the Team Office on 0300 060 2570, or in writing to: Natural England, Riverside Chambers, Castle Street, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 4AP.