

Waders

Wading birds spend most of their time in the estuary feeding on the mud flats at low water. When high tides push them inshore they gather in their thousands to roost on the beaches at Ainsdale, Southport, Marshside, Lytham and St Annes. Disturbance at this time is a major drain on their energy reserves since this is often their only period of rest.



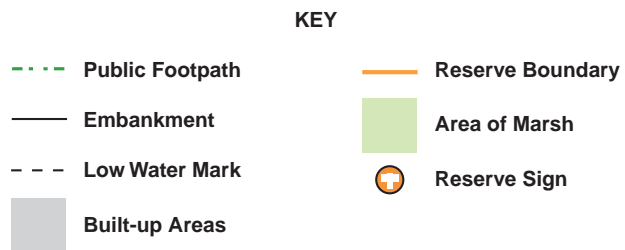
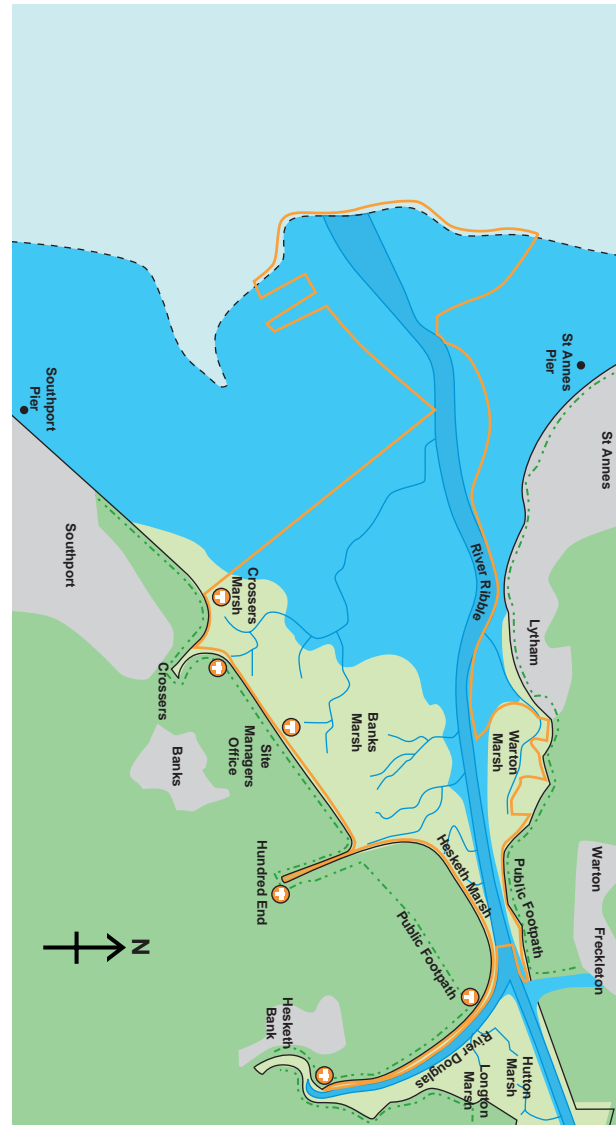
Ringed Plover - English Nature

Most of the waders seen in the estuary breed in the high Arctic. As they move south in the autumn, some use the Ribble Estuary to feed and rest before continuing their journey, and some remain here all winter. In the spring, returning migrants call in to refuel before they all leave on the long flight to Greenland or northern Russia. Summer is then quiet until the first autumn arrivals start the cycle again.

Access

A public footpath, from which views can be obtained, skirts the whole of the estuary (see map). Access onto the saltmarsh is permitted from the embankment between Crossens and Hundred End.

Please take care; tidal saltmarshes can be dangerous places; check the tide and weather conditions; wear suitable clothing and ensure someone knows where you are going and when you will return. Try not to disturb the birds. The best and safest vantage points at high tide are the Coast Road at Southport/Marshside and the promenade at Lytham St Annes.



Ribble Estuary

National Nature Reserve

English Nature

This is one of many nature reserves managed by English Nature, the Government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and geology throughout England.

For further information

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www.english-nature.org.uk

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English Nature works alongside other organisations as part of The Ribble Estuary Partnership
Tel: 01772 877122. Or visit
www.ribble-estuary.co.uk

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for nature tomorrow

Ribble Estuary

National Nature Reserve

The nature reserve, established in 1979, now includes over half of the Ribble Estuary. Its 4,697 hectares (11,613 acres) contain large areas of intertidal mud and sand flats and the largest single area of saltmarsh in northwest England. The main wildlife interest within the site is the birds, and English Nature's management, particularly of the saltmarshes, has resulted in an increase in the numbers of many species.

International importance

The Ribble Estuary is an important part of the network of wetland sites in Western Europe. It is the most important wildfowl site in the UK, supports over a quarter of a million waders and wildfowl each winter, and is an internationally important site for twenty species of birds.

Recreation, fishing, wildfowling and farming all take place within the estuary in balance with the wildlife interest.



Massed bird flying - Phil Smith

Estuaries

There is a rich assortment of habitats for wildlife, from the sandbanks of the outer areas, through waterlogged mudflats and muddy gutters (creeks) to the higher areas of saltmarsh. Tides regularly cover these areas and all the plants and animals must be adapted to the salty conditions of the marine environment. Estuaries are also very unstable. Storm driven tides in winter reshape sandbanks and channels, and saltmarsh can grow or shrink in the ongoing battle between sea and land.

Sand banks

Sand is pushed into high ridges by the action of waves. Very few animals are able to survive in this very active environment, but the height of the banks means that they are the last areas to be covered by each incoming tide. They are therefore very important areas for both waders and wildfowl as roosting sites, safe from predators and disturbance.



Mud, gutter and Glasswort - Phil Smith

Mud flats

The mud flats of the outer estuary are the collection points for all the fine silt and waste materials brought in by the sea and rivers and off the saltmarsh. This forms the 'soup' that feeds a vast population of small animals including marine worms, shellfish, shrimps and crabs, and young fish. These, in turn, feed 150,000 wading birds, which seek shelter on the estuary each winter.



Cattle on marsh - Mike Gee

Saltmarsh

Almost all of the saltmarshes in the estuary are grazed with sheep or cattle. This traditional agricultural use encourages the spread of those plants, such as common saltmarsh grass, which form the staple diet of the wigeon, pink-footed geese and wild swans.

Breeding birds

The undisturbed saltmarshes provide a haven for many ground-nesting birds in summer with up to 20,000 pairs of black-headed gulls, along with herring gulls, lesser black-backed gulls, common terns, redshanks, oystercatchers and lapwings. Skylark, meadow pipit and linnet, may also nest in large numbers.



Lapwing on nest - Peter Smith



Wigeon (duck) - Terry Bond

Wildfowl

Arrivals begin from September onwards; wigeon from eastern Russia, whooper swans and pink-footed geese from Iceland and Bewick's swans from Siberia. At dawn and dusk birds can be seen as they fly from the saltmarsh to roost in the outer estuary (wigeon) or at Martin Mere (swans and geese). Many of the birds can be watched feeding on the reclaimed marsh on the landward side of the Coast Road at Marshside. The numbers of birds visiting the Reserve have increased since 1979, the geese from 5,000 to 20,000 and the wigeon from 6,000 to 85,000.



Pink-footed geese - Colin Smith