

EC Directive 79/409 on the Conservation of Wild Birds:
Special Protection Area

The Swale extensions (Kent)

The Swale Special Protection Area is a wetland of international importance, comprising intertidal mudflats, shellbeaches, saltmarshes and extensive grazing marshes. It provides habitats for important assemblages of wintering waterfowl, and also supports notable breeding bird populations.

The proposed extensions to the Swale SPA include areas of intertidal mudflats and grazing marshes adjacent to the existing site and within The Swale Site of Special Scientific Interest. These areas are integral components of the complex of estuarine habitats composing the Swale.

The Swale qualifies under Article 4.2 of the EC Birds Directive as a wetland of international importance by virtue of regularly supporting over 20,000 waterfowl, with an average peak count of 57,600 birds recorded in the five winter period 1986/87 to 1990/91. This total includes internationally or nationally important wintering populations of seventeen species of migratory waterfowl. Of these, two occur in significant numbers within the proposed extensions: dark-bellied brent geese *Branta bernicla bernicla* and dunlin *Calidris alpina*. In the five winter period 1986/87 to 1990/91, the average peak counts for the Swale as a whole were 2,850 dark-bellied brent geese (1.6% of the world population, 3.1% of the British wintering population) and 13,000 dunlin (3% of the British wintering population). The mudflats of the proposed extensions have, in recent years, supported over 400 dark-bellied brent geese and 900 dunlin.

The mudflats of the proposed extensions support smaller numbers of several other species of wintering migratory waterfowl, including oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, curlew *Numenius arquata* and redshank *Tringa totanus*. These species are present in internationally or nationally important numbers within the Swale as a whole.

The Swale also qualifies under Article 4.2 by virtue of regularly supporting diverse assemblages of the wintering and breeding migratory waterfowl of lowland wet grassland and other estuarine habitats.

The grazing marshes of the proposed extensions support an assemblage of wintering species typical of the grazing marshes elsewhere within the Swale, including shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, wigeon *Anas penelope*, teal *Anas crecca* and curlew *Numenius arquata*. These species are present in internationally or nationally important numbers within the Swale as a whole.

The grazing marshes also support a typical assemblage of breeding species, including shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, coot *Fulica atra*, lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, redshank *Tringa totanus*, reed warbler

Acrocephalus scirpaceus and reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*. Some of these species have restricted distributions in Britain because of habitat loss and degradation.

The grazing marshes of the proposed extensions also regularly support wintering, and occasionally breeding, short-eared owl *Asio flammeus* (a species listed under Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive).

During severe winter weather elsewhere, the Swale, including those areas within the proposed extensions, can assume even greater national and international importance as a cold weather refuge. Wildfowl and waders from many other areas arrive, attracted by the relatively mild climate, compared with continental European areas, and the abundant food resources available.

The Swale SPA, including the proposed extensions, is part of the larger Thames estuary and contributes to its overall regional significance for birds in a European context.

SPA citation
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