

EC Directive 92/43 on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora

Citation for Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Name:	The Wash and North Norfolk Coast
Unitary Authority/County:	Lincolnshire, Norfolk
SAC status:	Designated on 1 April 2005
Grid reference:	TF558403
SAC EU code:	UK0017075
Area (ha):	107761.28
Component SSSI:	Gibraltar Point SSSI, North Norfolk Coast SSSI, The Wash SSSI

Site description:

The Wash is the largest embayment in the UK. It is connected via sediment transfer systems to the north Norfolk coast. Together, the Wash and North Norfolk Coast form one of the most important marine areas in the UK and European North Sea coast, and include extensive areas of varying, but predominantly sandy, sediments subject to a range of conditions. Communities in the intertidal include those characterised by large numbers of polychaetes, bivalve and crustaceans. Subtidal communities cover a diverse range from the shallow to the deeper parts of the embayments and include dense brittlestar beds and areas of an abundant reef-building worm ('ross worm') *Sabellaria spinulosa*. The embayment supports a variety of mobile species, including a range of fish, otter *Lutra lutra* and common seal *Phoca vitulina*. The extensive intertidal flats provide ideal conditions for common seal breeding and hauling-out.

Sandy sediments occupy most of the subtidal area, resulting in one of the largest expanses of subtidal sandbanks in the UK. The subtidal sandbanks vary in composition and include coarse sand through to mixed sediment at the mouth of the embayment. Communities present include large dense beds of brittlestars *Ophiothrix fragilis*. Species include the sand-mason worm *Lanice conchilega* and the tellin *Angulus tenuis*. Benthic communities on sandflats in the deeper, central part of the Wash are particularly diverse. The subtidal sandbanks provide important nursery grounds for young commercial fish species, including plaice *Pleuronectes platessa*, cod *Gadus morhua* and sole *Solea solea*.

In the tide-swept approaches to the Wash, with a high loading of suspended sand, the relatively common tube-dwelling polychaete worm *Sabellaria spinulosa* forms areas of biogenic reef. These structures are varied in nature, and include reefs which stand up to 30 cm proud of the seabed and which extend for hundreds of metres. The reefs extend into The Wash where super-abundant *S. spinulosa* occurs and where reef-like structures such as concretions and crusts have been recorded. The reefs are diverse and productive habitats which support many associated species that would not otherwise be found in predominantly sedimentary areas. Associated motile species include large numbers of polychaetes, mysid shrimps, the pink shrimp *Pandalus montagui*, and crabs.

Sandy flats predominate in the intertidal zone with some soft mudflats in the areas sheltered by barrier beaches and islands along the north Norfolk coast. The biota includes especially large numbers of polychaetes, mysid shrimps, the pink shrimp and crabs. Salinity ranges from that of the open coast in most of the area (supporting rich invertebrate communities) to estuarine close to the rivers. Smaller, sheltered and diverse areas of intertidal sediment, with a

rich variety of communities, including some eelgrass *Zostera* spp. beds and large shallow pools, are protected by the north Norfolk barrier islands and sand spits.

The site contains the largest single area of saltmarsh in the UK and is one of the few areas in the UK where saltmarshes are generally accreting. The proportion of the total saltmarsh vegetation represented by glasswort *Salicornia* and other colonising annuals is high because of the extensive enclosure of marsh in this site and is also unusual in that it forms a pioneer community with common cord-grass *Spartina anglica*. There are large ungrazed saltmarshes on the North Norfolk Coast and traditionally grazed saltmarshes around the Wash. Saltmarsh swards dominated by sea-lavenders *Limonium* spp. are particularly well-represented. In North Norfolk, in addition to typical lower and middle saltmarsh communities, there are transitions from upper marsh to tidal reedswamp, sand dunes (which are largely within the adjacent North Norfolk Coast SAC), shingle beaches and mud/sandflats. Mediterranean saltmarsh scrub vegetation is dominated by a shrubby cover up to 1 metre high of bushes of shrubby sea-blite *Suaeda vera* and sea-purslane *Atriplex portulacoides*, with a patchy cover of herbaceous plants and bryophytes. This scrub vegetation often forms an important feature of the upper saltmarshes, and extensive examples occur where the drift-line slopes gradually and provides a transition to dune, shingle or reclaimed sections of the coast. At a number of locations on this coast perennial glasswort *Sarcocornia perennis* forms an open mosaic with other species at the lower limit of the sea-purslane community.

Qualifying habitats: The site is designated under **article 4(4)** of the Directive (92/43/EEC) as it hosts the following habitats listed in Annex I:

- Atlantic salt meadows (*Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae*)
- Coastal lagoons*
- Large shallow inlets and bays
- Mediterranean and thermo-Atlantic halophilous scrubs (*Sarcocornetea fruticosi*). (Mediterranean saltmarsh scrub)
- Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide. (Intertidal mudflats and sandflats)
- Reefs
- *Salicornia* and other annuals colonising mud and sand. (Glasswort and other annuals colonising mud and sand)
- Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time. (Subtidal sandbanks)

Qualifying species: The site is designated under **article 4(4)** of the Directive (92/43/EEC) as it hosts the following species listed in Annex II:

- Common seal *Phoca vitulina*
- Otter *Lutra lutra*

Annex I priority habitats are denoted by an asterisk (*).

This citation relates to a site entered in the Register of European Sites for Great Britain.

Register reference number: UK0017075

Date of registration: 14 June 2005

Signed: *Trevor Salmon*

On behalf of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs