

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

Citation for Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Name:	Essex Estuaries
Unitary Authority/County:	Essex
SAC status:	Designated on 1 April 2005
Grid reference:	TM103048
SAC EU code:	UK0012720
Area (ha):	46140.82
Component SSSI:	Blackwater Estuary SSSI, Colne Estuary SSSI, Crouch and Roach Estuaries SSSI, Dengie SSSI, Foulness SSSI

Site description:

This is a typical, undeveloped, coastal plain estuarine system with associated open coast mudflats and sandbanks. The site comprises the major estuaries of the Colne, Blackwater, Crouch and Roach rivers. Essex Estuaries contains a very wide range of characteristic marine and estuarine sediment communities and some diverse and unusual marine communities in the lower reaches, including rich sponge communities on mixed, tide-swept substrates. Subtidal areas have a very rich invertebrate fauna, including the reef-building worm *Sabellaria spinulosa*, the brittlestar *Ophiothrix fragilis*, crustaceans and ascidians.

There are extensive intertidal mudflats and sandflats in estuaries and at Dengie Flats and Maplin Sands. The area includes a wide range of sediment flat communities, from estuarine muds, sands and muddy sands to fully saline, sandy mudflats with extensive growths of eelgrass *Zostera* spp. on the open coast. Glasswort *Salicornia* spp. saltmarsh forms an integral part of the transition from the extensive and varied intertidal mud and sandflats through to upper salt meadows. The area of pioneer marsh includes gradation into extensive cord-grass *Spartina* spp. swards, including the most extensive remaining stand of the native small cord-grass *Spartina maritima* in the UK and possibly in Europe at Foulness Point. Other smaller stands are found elsewhere in the estuary complex, notably in the Colne estuary, where it forms a major component of the upper marsh areas.

Extensive upper saltmarshes remain, including Atlantic salt meadows with floristic features typical of this part of the UK. Golden samphire *Inula crithmoides* is a characteristic species of these marshes, occurring both on the lower marsh and on the drift-line. Mediterranean saltmarsh scrub occurs principally as a strandline community or at the foot of sea-walls. The local variant of this vegetation, which features sea-lavenders *Limonium* spp. and sea-heath *Frankenia laevis*, occurs at one location, Colne Point.

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*)
- Estuaries
- 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)
- *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)
- *Spartina* swards (*Spartinion maritimae*). (Cord-grass swards)

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

Register reference number: UK0012720

Date of registration: 14 June 2005

Signed: *Trevor Salmon*

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