

EC Directive 79/409 on the conservation of wild birds: Special Protection Area

Nene Washes (Cambridgeshire)

The Nene Washes is an area of seasonally flooding grassland and grazing marsh in the lower reaches of the River Nene, Cambridgeshire. The boundaries of the site follows those of the Nene Washes (Whittlesey) SSSI.

The site qualifies under Article 4.1 of the EC Birds Directive by regularly supporting, in winter, an internationally important wintering population of Bewick's swan *Cygnus columbarius bewickii* (1,300 individuals: over 7% of the north-west European population wintering population: average of peak counts for the five year period 1987/88 to 1991/92).

Nene Washes qualifies also under Article 4.2 by supporting, in summer, in recent years, nationally important breeding populations of regularly occurring migratory species: 25 pairs of gadwall *Anas strepera* (5% of British): five pairs of garganey *Anas querquedula* (10% of British), 36 pairs of shoveler *A. clypeata* (3% of British), and 16 pairs of black-tailed godwits *Limosa limosa* (30% of British), as well as several other rare birds.

The site further qualifies under Article 4.2 by supporting, in winter, nationally important wintering populations of five migratory species (average peak counts for the most recent five year period for which data is available (1984/5 - 1985/86 and 1988/89 - 1990/91): 3,640 wigeon *Anas penelope* (over 1 % of the British wintering population): 980 teal *A. crecca* (1% of British), 95 gadwall *Anas strepera* (over 1% of British): 440 Pintail *Anas acuta* (over 1% of British) and 110 shoveler *Anas clypeata* (over 1% of British).

The Nene Washes is also of importance for a diverse assemblage of breeding birds of wet grasslands, including: redshank *Tringa totanus*, snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, mute swan *Cygnus olor*, sedge warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* and yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava*. The site has an important role in maintaining the range of several of these species which have been affected by changes in habitat elsewhere in Britain.

Also notable is an assemblage of wintering waterfowl including, in addition to species listed above, mute swan, whooper swan *C. cygnus*, mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, pochard *Aythya ferina*, tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*, shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* and coot *Fulica atra*. A wide range of raptors occur through the year on the Nene Washes, including merlin *Falco columbarius*, hobby *F. subbuteo*, peregrine *F. peregrinus*, marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, hen harrier *C. cyaneus*, sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, short-eared owl *Asio flammeus*, long-eared owl *A. otus*, and barn owl *Tyto alba*.

During severe winter weather elsewhere, the Nene Washes can assume even greater national and international importance as 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. It can also assume greater importance at times on deep flooding on the nearby Ouse Washes when it holds displaced birds.

The continued international importance of this site is dependant on the maintenance of a winter flooding regime and a high, but controlled summer water table.

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