

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

### Mid-Essex Coast

#### Colne Estuary

The Mid-Essex Coast comprises an extensive complex of estuaries and intertidal sand and silt flats, including several islands, shingle and shell beaches and extensive areas of saltmarsh. The proposed Special Protection Area follows the boundaries of five SSSIs: the Colne Estuary, the Blackwater Estuary, Dengie, River Crouch Marshes and Foulness.

The Colne Estuary qualifies under Article 4.1 of the Birds Directive by supporting nationally important breeding populations of an Annex 1 species: the average peak count of little tern *Sterna albifrons* over the period 1987-1991 was 73 pairs (3% of British breeding population). The Colne Estuary is one of several sites within the proposed SPA where these birds breed.

The Colne Estuary also qualifies under Article 4.1 by regularly supporting a nationally important wintering population of an Annex 1 species, the hen harrier *Circus cyaneus*. During the period 1987/88 to 1991/92 a mean of 19 birds (2% of the British total) occurred in the Mid-Essex Coast area. The Colne Estuary is one of a number of sites used in the area.

The Colne Estuary qualifies under Article 4.2 by supporting, in summer, nationally important populations of two regularly occurring migratory species. Between 1987 and 1991 an average peak mean of 15 pairs (7% of British breeding population) of pochard *Aythya ferina* and 135 pairs (1% of British) of ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* bred in the proposed SPA.

The Colne Estuary also qualifies under Article 4.2 as a wetland of international importance by regularly supporting, in winter, over 20,000 waterfowl. In the five year period 1987/88 to 1991/92 the average peak count was 30,687 birds, comprising 8,675 wildfowl and 22,012 waders. It regularly supports, in winter, internationally important numbers of the following two species of migratory waterfowl (average peak counts for the period 1987/88 to 1991/92): 5,315 dark-bellied brent geese *Branta bernicla bernicla* (3.1 % of the total world population, 5.9% of the British wintering population) and 1,252 redshank *Tringa totanus* (1.1% of the East Atlantic Flyway (EAF) population, 1.6% of British).

The Colne Estuary also supports nationally important wintering populations of a further 10 species: 243 cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (1.2% of British), 354 mute swan *Cygnus olor* (1.9% of British), 1,237 shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* 1.6% of British), 262 Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* (1.7% of British), 355 ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (1.5% of British), 1,168 grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (5.5% of British), 219 sanderling *Calidris alba* (1.5% of British), 11,272 dunlin *Calidris alpina* (2.6% of British), 606 black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa* (12.7% of British) and 938 curlew *Numenius arquata* (1% of British).

During severe winter weather the Mid-Essex Coast (including the Colne Estuary) can assume even greater national and international importance as wildfowl and waders from many other areas arrive, attracted by the relatively mild climate and the abundant food resources available in this Special Protection Area.