



# Walberswick

## National Nature Reserve

Front cover image: View of old mill  
from East Hill hide  
© Roz Gordon Photography

Back cover image: Marsh harrier.  
© Natural England/Allan Drewitt



Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

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## Welcome to Walberswick

Walberswick National Nature Reserve is one of three NNRs managed by Natural England along the Suffolk coast, the others being Benacre and Westleton Heath. What makes it such a special place to visit is the wide mix of habitats on 810 ha. It is managed for wildlife and visitors.

Walberswick is one of the most accessible and popular wildlife sites along the Suffolk coast. Once you've visited we think you'll keep coming back again and again to see the shingle beach and iconic reedbeds. Why not plan to come on one of our guided walks the next time you come – see our website [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk) for details.

You'll find it easy to access the paths on one of the largest reedbeds in Britain at Westwood Marshes, grazing marsh, rich hay meadows, 19th-century woodland, intertidal mudflats and the Blyth tidal estuary. This great mix of habitat and food means Walberswick is ideal for wildlife spotting.

Please remember to follow the Countryside code at all times – these sites are working nature reserves and sheep and cattle will often be grazing. Wildlife conservation and peaceful enjoyment of nature are our goals.



Westwood Marshes is one of the largest reedbeds in Britain

## Living on a changing coastline

A combination of the forces of nature and the hand of man have created the landscape we see at Walberswick today. Shingle is a mobile habitat, and this proved momentous for the busy port of Dunwich – home to a prosperous boat building industry and the Royal fleet in the 14th century – when it blocked up the harbour and the villagers of Walberswick cut a new route for the Blyth river to the sea.

The land around Westwood Marshes was drained for use as grazing pasture and Tinkers Marshes were reclaimed for farming between the 16th and 18th centuries, with grazing creating good conditions for breeding snipe and lapwing. That all changed in the 20th century when the land was flooded to fend off the risk of invasion during the Second World War.

By the end of the war, reeds had started to spread out from the flooded dykes. Aerial photos from 1946 show much of the Marshes still covered by water and ten years later the reeds had spread over much of the Marshes. The sea regularly overtops the shingle beach and increasingly floods Westwood Marshes. Natural England is working with the Environment Agency to ensure that the wildlife has a chance to adapt to these changes over the next 50 years.



© Natural England/Allan Drewitt

## Climate change

Climate change represents one of the most serious long term threats to our natural environment. To try and stop it getting any worse we must cut the amount of greenhouse gases we produce.

Just as urgently, if the natural environment is to survive, we must all find ways to help it adapt to the already locked-in-changes. You can help by taking public transport to Walberswick.



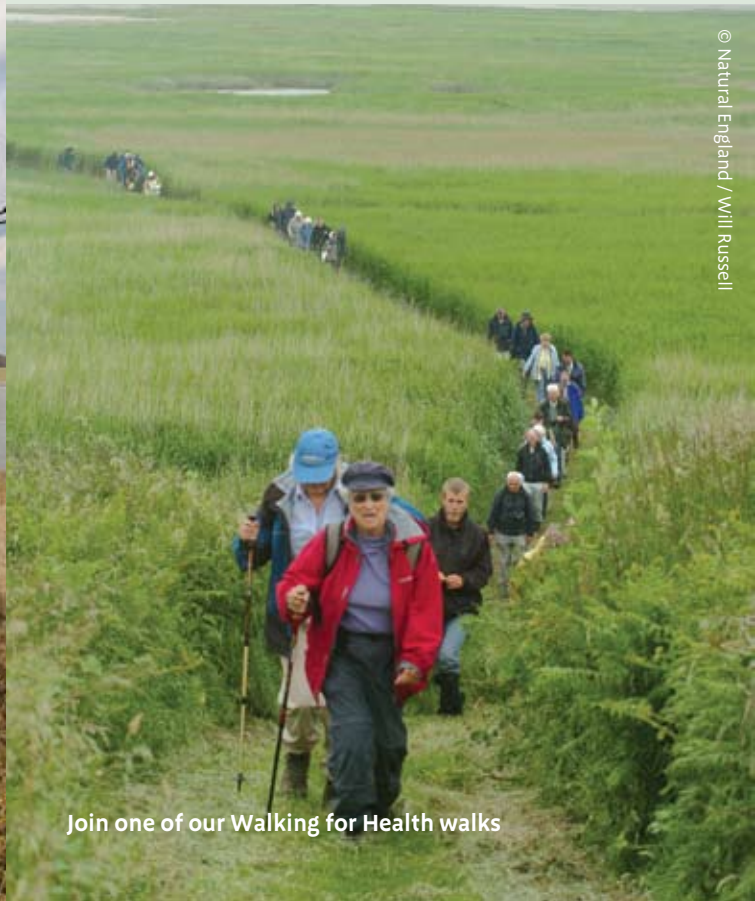
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Blyth estuary, one of the new audio trails

## Health and the natural environment

NNRs are among the best places to get out and about in the natural environment and experience nature. Medical evidence shows that contact with the natural environment improves health and wellbeing, prevents disease and helps people recover from illness. This evidence also shows that experiencing nature in the outdoors can help tackle childhood obesity, coronary heart disease, stress and mental health problems.

Why not join one of our reserve staff on a Walking for Health walk? For details please visit [www.wfh.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.wfh.naturalengland.org.uk)



© Natural England / Will Russell

Join one of our Walking for Health walks



Home to nightjar, woodlark and silver studded blue butterfly

## Heathland

Thousands of years ago this reserve, like much of southern Britain, was covered with forests of birch and oak. Early man cleared the woodlands for timber, fuel and to create farmland allowing heathland to establish. By the 17th century it was common practice to graze sheep on heaths during the day and then move them on to farmland to allow their manure to help fertilize the light sandy soils at night.

Rabbits briefly took over from the sheep to maintain the short-cropped heath vegetation until the outbreak of myxomatosis in 1953 drastically reduced their numbers. Left to themselves, heathlands tend to return to woodland so we have spent many years restoring the heaths to their former glory, removing invasive birch and clearing bracken. Sheep grazing, often by rare breeds such as Norfolk Horn and Hampshire Down, has been re-established to keep them in good condition for heathland specialists such as nightjar, woodlark and the silver studded blue butterfly.

Anyone interested in military history will find many pillboxes and slit trenches scattered around as evidence of the site's use for military training during the last war.

[www.walberswickww2.co.uk](http://www.walberswickww2.co.uk)

## Blyth Estuary

One of the most impressive wildlife sights of the winter are flocks of returning teal, wigeon and pintail leaving the north of Britain and Scandinavia to come back to feed on the intertidal mud and grazing marshes. They are joined by feral and wild geese, greylags mixing with pink footed and barnacle geese. Occasionally the more common mute swans will be joined by small groups of yellow-beaked whooper and Bewick's swans.

As a back drop to all of these are the flocks of waders, avocet, golden plover from the moors up north intermingled with grey plover from the arctic tundra. Tiny dunlin and knot rise in clouds from their feeding in amongst oystercatchers, lapwing, and redshank. The larger, long beaked curlew probes the mud for food, surrounded by crowds of gulls.

Walking the paths on the estuary edge or through the reeds gives good views of the site and on quieter days, either near dawn or dusk, you may catch the flash of kingfishers, or spot the secretive water rail dashing for cover. Why not download our new audio trail for an easy one hour guided walk along the estuary?



Pied avocet

## Shingle Beach and shore pools

One of the most popular walks is to head south along the shingle ridge from the village towards a remote area of spectacular shingle and pools. You may see avocets jealously protecting their young, or scuttling ringed plover diving for cover along the way.

In the summer the shingle is dotted with colour from yellow horned poppy, sea pea and sea beet, whilst samphire flourishes in between the pools. Late in the year its seeds will feed the twite returning from breeding in the Pennines. In some years little tern nest successfully, identified by the piercing calls of these 'sea swallows'.

Take a minute to see if you can spot the tiny rare Starlet sea anemone in the shore pools, so-called because the tiny pinpricks of their waving tendrils in the water look exactly like a clear night sky.

Towards the back of the pools where the grasses become thicker, meadow pipits and skylark nest, before the tall reeds take over and become the domain of the bittern and marsh harrier. This rare harrier needs wetlands to survive. It feeds on small mammals, birds and marsh frogs that live around the reedbeds.



Yellow horned poppy

© Natural England/Sue Rees



Bittern

© Natural England/Adam Burrows

## Westwood Marshes

Follow the board walk into 190 hectares of reedbed. Head for the ruins of the old pump mill and at dusk, in late spring, you may hear the deep booming call of the male bittern, and witness the breathtaking sky dancing displays of the marsh harriers. Closer to the path you'll hear the 'pinging' cry of bearded tits as they flit across the reed heads.

Otters use the dykes to hunt and the surrounding woods to rear their young, whilst water voles loaf on the water side chewing reed stems, plopping into the water as danger approaches.

We manage the Marshes to create lots of different habitats to make it attractive to wildlife. Local reedcutters cut reeds for thatching and the cleared areas provide excellent spring pools for bitterns and herons to feed on fish and amphibians. The undisturbed areas provide nesting sites and insects. Small mammals live in the accumulation of dead reeds. The fish in the open water are a larder for otters and kingfishers. Periodically the invasive trees are removed and the dykes kept open. Without this management Westwood marshes would eventually become woodland, causing us to lose much of the wildlife that makes this such a unique and wonderful place.

## Good to know ...

- There are three permanent bird hides on the NNR: one on the south side of the Blyth estuary (follow the path down alongside the White Hart pub for about five mins), one looking over a reedbed pool at East Hill, and one in Dunwich forest overlooking Westwood reedbed.
- Dogs on leads or under close control are welcome – but help us by being careful when walking near grazing stock, and from March to September when birds may be nesting and rearing young on the ground. The adult birds can be easily scared and may abandon the nest if driven off by dogs.
- Campsites are available at Hinton, Walberswick and Southwold. Please help us protect rare species and reduce the number of fires on the Reserve by using the camp sites. It's heart breaking when a barbecue or beach fire gets out of control and we've lost rare marsh harrier nests in the past.
- We have three great audio trails downloadable from <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designatedareas/nnr/1009527.aspx> to follow as you walk round the reserve.

## Wildlife through the seasons

Spring is when the Reserve comes to life. The skies are full of birds swooping and calling in spectacular aerobatic displays – first to attract mates, but later turning to calls of alarm to distract predators away from eggs and young chicks. Many birds, including the rare little tern make their nests on the ground, the chicks relying on camouflage to keep them safe. Both eggs and young are extremely vulnerable to tramping and attack by predators.

As spring turns to summer more flowers appear, and young wader chicks can be seen running around in the long grass searching for food. By August the heather is in flower, turning the heaths above Walberswick into a bright purple haze. The bird hide at the top of the Blyth Estuary is a great winter spot to see avocet, black tailed godwit, pintail and wigeon.

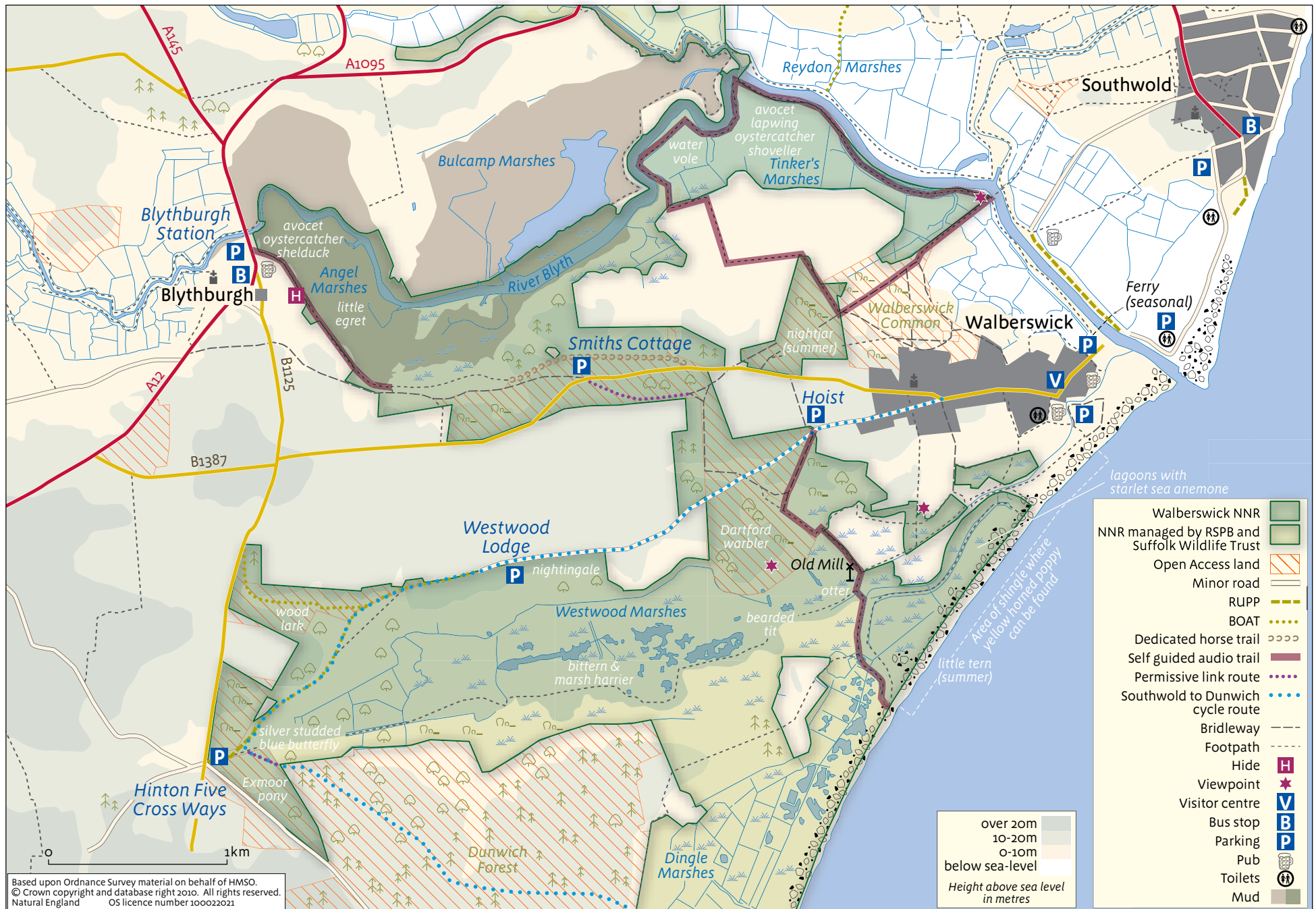
## How to get there

The Reserve lies around the village of Walberswick. Crisscrossed with 20 miles of Public Rights of Way there are many different places to access the site. If you want to head for the shingle beach and then on to the magnificent reed beds, head for the centre of the village and choose one of the car parks (charges apply between April and September). If you want to avoid the crowds you could park at Blythburgh and walk along the shores of the estuary and through cooler woodlands into the village before catching the 536 bus back up to the car park (for timetable details ring Nightingale of Beccles on 01502 710999). There are seven convenient car parks – check map for details.

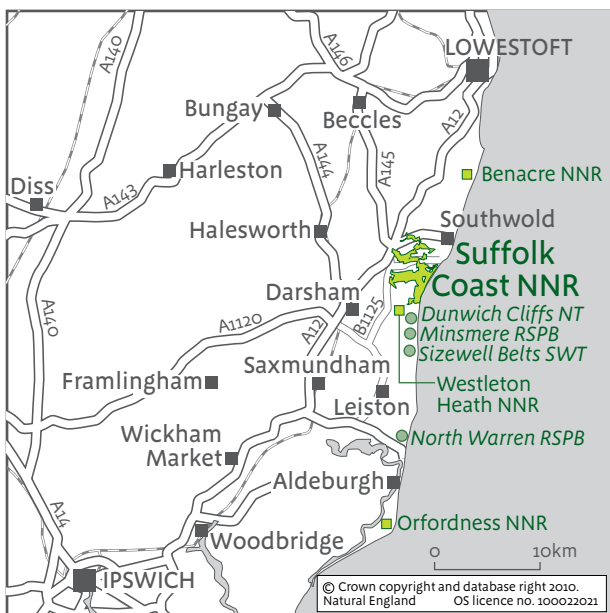


© Natural England / Will Russell

Children love watching birds from the hide near Blythburgh



For further information about the Reserve, details of walks and opportunities to become a volunteer please contact:  
 The Senior Reserve Manager, Natural England, The Barn, Frostenden Hall Farm, Church Lane, Frostenden, Beccles, Suffolk. NR34 7HS Telephone: 01502 676171



**By foot:** Walberswick is on the Suffolk Coastal path, look out for the blue and yellow waymarkers on the route – you can pick up the path in the harbour car park in the village. There are 14 miles of paths on the NNR.

**By rail:** nearest stations five miles away at Darsham and Halesworth.

**By bus:** Anglian Buses 601 Halesworth-Lowestoft via Blythborough and Southwold.

**Coastlink:** To make a request to be picked up by the on demand bus service, which is priced at a level similar to regular bus services, just call 01728 833526 before 12 noon on the day before you want to travel. Booking hours are 8am-6pm.

**By car:** Turn off the A12 Ipswich to Lowestoft road, on to B1387 signposted for Walberswick, or to Blythburgh for spectacular views of the estuary.