

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

Mid-Essex Coast

Blackwater 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, the River Crouch Marshes and Foulness.

The Blackwater Estuary qualifies under Article 4.1 of the Birds Directive by supporting, in summer, nationally important breeding populations of an Annex 1 species, the little tern *Sterna albifrons*. Between 1987 and 1991 a mean of 73 pairs (3% of British breeding population) bred in the Mid-Essex Coast area. The Blackwater Estuary is one of several sites within the proposed SPA where these birds nest.

The Blackwater Estuary also qualifies under Article 4.1 by regularly supporting nationally important wintering populations 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 Blackwater Estuary is one of a number of sites used in the area.

The Blackwater Estuary qualifies under Article 4.2 by supporting, in summer, nationally important populations of two regularly occurring migratory species. Between 1987 and 1991 a mean of 15 pairs (7% of British) of pochard *Aythya ferina* and 135 pairs (1% of British) of ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* bred in the proposed SPA. The Blackwater Estuary is one of a number of sites used.

The 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 46,552 birds, comprising 16,059 wildfowl and 30,493 waders. The Blackwater Estuary regularly supports in winter internationally important numbers of the following four species of migratory waterfowl (average peak counts for the period 1987/88 to 1991/92): 8,761 dark-bellied brent geese *Branta bernicla bernicla* (5.1% of total world population, 9.7% of British population), 2,172 grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (1.2% of East Atlantic Flyway (EAF) population, 10.2% of British), 17,743 dunlin *Calidris alpina* (1.2% EAF, 4% of British) and 755 black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa* (1.1% EAF, 15.8% of British).

The Blackwater Estuary also supports nationally important wintering populations of a further eight species: 243 cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (1.2% of British), 2,425 shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (3.2% of British), 69 gadwall *Anas strepera* (1.1% of British), 2,190 teal *Anas crecca* (2.1% of British), 315 goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* (2.1% of British), 338 ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (1.4% of British), 1,847 curlew *Numenius arquata* (2% of British), 1,079 redshank *Tringa totanus* (1.4% of British).

During severe winter weather the Blackwater Estuary (and the whole Mid-Essex Coast) 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.

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