



for birds
for people
for ever

FRESHWATER **WETLANDS**

The need for more in Eastern England



This leaflet focuses on

Eastern England's freshwater wetlands

and the benefits of creating more. We hope we can work with you to turn visions and targets into reality.

RSPB Berney Marshes, Norfolk



THE VALUE OF WETLANDS

G Dore (rsph-images.com)

FOR PEOPLE...

Wetland landscapes have fascinated and inspired artists and writers for centuries. Whether it is through childhood favourites such as *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Wind in the Willows*, or the atmospheric landscape paintings of John Constable, wetlands hold a special place in our cultural heritage.

Historically, people worked with nature using the rich wetlands to provide for their needs. In the Fens, early settlers lived and worked with the wetlands, harvesting reed for thatching and animal bedding, eels and fish for the table and for sale in London, and cutting peat for fuel. The bittern, now one of the UK's rarest breeding birds, was once sufficiently common that Fens people would have roast bittern for Sunday lunch. The now familiar landscape of Broadland owes its existence to medieval peat workings, which created the shallow lakes or Broads. Between these Broads, large areas of marshland were later drained by windmills to provide livestock grazing.



Wetlands are a fun place for leisure and learning

C H Gomersall (rsph-images.com)

- Wetlands aid flood defence by acting as sponges slowing down the passage of rainwater to the rivers, thereby increasing the capacity of the catchment and reducing flood risk.
- Existing washlands in the Fens, such as the Ouse and Nene, have protected people and property, including the most productive arable land in the UK, from flooding since the 17th century. Without the Ouse Washes, given the low level of land in the Fens, an area from Ely to Peterborough would flood¹.
- Wetlands provide a focus for leisure activities including birdwatching, angling, watersports and wildfowling. Over quarter of a million visitors a year enjoy RSPB wetland reserves in Eastern England and contribute to the local economy through spending during their stay. The RSPB's Titchwell Marsh reserve brought £1.8 million to the north Norfolk economy in 1999. Visitors to Minsmere in Suffolk spent £1.1 million locally, supporting 27 jobs².
- Wetlands provide an exciting location for school field study trips. On average 35 schools bring 1,250 pupils to the RSPB field teaching facilities at Fowlmere each year.
- Provision of footpaths and cycleways through wetlands can provide opportunities for people to exercise in a relaxing and peaceful environment.

FOR WILDLIFE...

Eastern England is particularly rich in wetland heritage, supporting 50% of the UK's reedbeds, 15% of our grazing marsh and 80% of the UK's resource of fen habitat – a very rare habitat in Europe³.

Reedbeds in Norfolk and Suffolk are the UK stronghold of the elusive bittern, one of our rarest breeding birds. Reedbeds also provide homes for other bird species such as bearded tits, marsh harriers and Savi's warblers. It is not just birds that have adapted to life among the reeds. Reedbeds and fens also support rare moths, swallowtail butterflies and other insects, water voles and otters.

Grazing marshes in Eastern England support in excess of 200,000 ducks, geese and swans in winter, while in summer birds like garganeys, lapwings, redshanks, snipe and yellow wagtails nest. One of the UK's rarest breeding waders, the black-tailed godwit has its stronghold in Eastern England. The water vole, 'Ratty' of *The Wind in the Willows* fame, depends on wet grasslands and their ditches, and many RSPB reserves in Eastern England have strong populations. Damselflies and dragonflies breed in the ditch systems and add grace, colour and excitement. Several scarce plants are also found in ditches and on fields of wet grasslands.



Black-tailed godwit

G Langsbury (rspb-images.com)

Specialist management creates homes for threatened species on RSPB nature reserves



Norfolk hawker

RSPB



Water vole

R Wilmshurst (rspb-images.com)

THREATS

Wetlands are increasingly scarce throughout the world. Systematic drainage has converted wetlands to arable farming. Nearly half of all the UK's reedbed has been lost since the end of World War II, while about 40% of wet grassland was lost between 1930 and 1980. In Essex by 1990, three-quarters of the grazing marsh recorded in 1935 had been converted into arable production and built development⁴.

- Surveys show that breeding waders such as redshanks and snipe are declining dramatically and becoming confined to nature reserves.
- The snipe used to be a widespread breeding bird. In the most recent survey of waders on wet grassland, over 40% of snipe in lowland England and Wales were found on just one site – the Ouse Washes in Cambridgeshire.
- In many parts of Eastern England the wetlands created peat soils. Drainage of these wetlands has produced high grade agricultural land, but over time the peat has dried out and is wasting away. We need to act quickly to recreate wetlands on these peat soils before there is none left.

Many of our existing wetlands are also threatened by lack of suitable management – without grazing, reed cutting and water management, they will not remain healthy. Declines in the thatching industry and other traditional crafts using osier mean that it is seldom commercial to harvest reed and osiers. This is essential to prevent build up of leaf litter, drying out of reedbeds and succession to willow.

These historic losses are now being compounded by the threat of sea level rise. Over 770 ha of internationally important freshwater wetlands, including Titchwell, Cley, Minsmere and Old Hall Marshes, are at risk from coastal erosion and saltwater⁵. It may not be possible to maintain these coastal wetlands in their current locations.

Changing climate patterns are also threatening some of our inland freshwater wetlands. Unseasonal flooding on the Ouse Washes is affecting breeding waders, including snipe and black-tailed godwits. Climate change may also reduce water available in the catchment while increasing the demands from agriculture for that water. Wetlands require a secure water supply and well-managed water regime to function properly. Water will need to be allocated for existing wetlands but it is important that water is also allocated for future habitat creation.

C H Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



More wetlands in Essex like Old Hall Marshes will benefit wintering ducks and geese

WHAT'S BEEN DONE TO DATE?

Several initiatives have been established to safeguard and enhance our existing wetland heritage.

UK and local Biodiversity Action Plans have established clear targets for the conservation of important wetland habitats and species.

Agri-environment schemes such as the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme and Countryside Stewardship have provided financial support to farmers to manage wetlands, to revert arable land to grassland and raise water levels to encourage marshland wildlife.

Water Level Management Plans balancing the needs of farmers with the needs of wetlands have yet to realise their significant potential for environmental improvements.

Several conservation organisations have worked hard for wetland conservation, restoring and managing existing sites and developing ambitious projects to create new wetlands. Some of these projects have been highly targeted to aid the recovery of endangered species such as the bittern.

In spite of great efforts, it still isn't enough.

A Hay (rspb-images.com)



Healthy wetlands like the Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire, need water to thrive

WHY DO WE NEED NEW WETLANDS?

New wetlands will benefit wildlife and people. It is time to reverse the decline in wetland habitats. The need for new and better managed habitats is clear and a framework already exists to help deliver this.

The Government, through the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), has set targets for conserving and recreating habitats and species. Partnerships have formed to turn these targets into reality. The UK also has obligations under the EU Habitats Directive to 'take appropriate steps to avoid deterioration' of our most important wetlands. In Eastern England, the very future of sites such as Minsmere, Cley and Blakeney is threatened by the changing coastline and sea level rise. No net loss of these important habitats can only be achieved by creating new sites.

These must be created as soon as possible because:

- new sites take time to mature to support the species that existing wetlands support
- many wetland habitats require peat soils and need to be created before all peat is lost.

Existing wetland habitats have become fragmented. To support as much wildlife as possible and to withstand pressures from people, these sites need to be joined up and expanded. Climate change will continue to influence natural habitats – larger blocks of habitat will be more robust to such pressures.

The UK target for new reedbed is to create 1,200 ha by 2020. The target for creation of new wet grassland was 2,500 ha⁶.



(rspb-images.com)

Ouse Washes, Cambridgeshire
– an inspirational landscape

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES

Eastern England is already rich in wetland heritage. It is also the most important region in the UK for wetland creation opportunities. Half of the UK BAP creation targets for wetlands could be achieved in Eastern England with opportunities in the Broads, on the Suffolk coast and river valleys and around the Wash. Probably the greatest opportunities for wetland creation schemes are in the Fens and in the South Essex Marshes.

Wetland creation can be integrated with the land-use planning system, particularly after-use of mineral extraction sites, new urban developments and linked to flood alleviation projects.

WHAT IS THE RSPB DOING?

The RSPB has already increased wetland wildlife in several places. We own and manage large areas of wetland habitats in Eastern England. The RSPB delivers specialist management targeted at helping the recovery of threatened species and habitats. Our land management is based on sound scientific research that we conduct on our existing sites. We have ambitious and achievable plans to do our bit to put wetlands back into the landscape. We have targets for about 10,000 ha of new wetlands throughout the region and we have already begun this process.

At Lakenheath Fen we have started to put back reedbed into the Fens landscape. In 1995, with Heritage Lottery funding, the RSPB bought 242 ha of carrot fields next to the river Little Ouse. We had to carry out large amounts of engineering to control water movement around the site and to dig meres and ditches to produce the best conditions possible for bitterns. Wildlife has responded incredibly quickly. We recorded only four



(rspb-images.com)

Lakenheath Fen, Suffolk – putting reedbeds back into the Fens landscape

pairs of reed warblers in 1996, but by 2003 this had risen to 406 pairs. Another exciting and ambitious project will create the largest freshwater reedbed in the UK. The RSPB is working with Hanson to create 700 ha of new wetlands at Needingworth in a 30-year project to restore a quarry following sand and gravel extraction. This project should achieve 40% of the UK BAP target for reedbed and should support about 20 booming bitterns. The site will also provide wonderful recreational opportunities for the local community with 32 km of new rights of way.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

To create new wetlands, we need to work together to:

- adopt supportive land-use planning policies that would help organisations deliver BAP targets
- amend policies protecting best and most versatile agricultural land to refer only to 'protection from irreversible loss' in accordance with the UK policy. Wetland creation is not an irreversible loss, indeed in the case of peatlands, wetland creation may safeguard the peat resource
- ensure county minerals plans have policies supporting after-use proposals for multi-functional wetlands delivering BAP habitats and recreational opportunities
- realise opportunities for wetland creation through positive planning. New developments should be balanced to ensure they have no impact on downstream flooding patterns. This could provide opportunities to create wetlands.
- plan for climate change to ensure water resources are safeguarded for existing and new wetlands
- ensure funding bodies are supportive of wetland creation.

We need your support.

CONCLUSIONS

New wetlands will:

- provide landscapes with new wildlife, helping to achieve biodiversity targets
- provide places for people to visit, relax and enjoy the tranquillity of the countryside
- help protect people from flooding by absorbing and retaining rainfall
- provide benefits to local economies
- preserve archaeological heritage and provide a landscape setting for its interpretation
- increase the resilience of existing habitats to climate change and people's influence.

REFERENCES

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- 5 The RSPB (1997) Coast in crisis: world famous wetlands at risk in Norfolk and Suffolk. The RSPB, Norwich.
- 6 Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan (1990) HMSO, London.

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Please continue to help support our wetland work in Eastern England.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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The RSPB works for a healthy environment rich in birds and other wildlife. It depends on the support and generosity of others to make a difference.

Cover: RSPB Strumpshaw Fen, Norfolk,
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