

**MARSHSIDE NATURE RESERVE  
EXTENSION**

**RSPB SUMMARY MANAGEMENT  
PLAN**

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# 1. SITE INFORMATION

## 1.1. Site location and background

Marshside RSPB Nature Reserve was established in 1994 with a 21-year lease, (from Sefton Council), covering 110 hectares of coastal grassland lying between the boundaries of the neighbouring houses behind the sea-wall and the Marine Drive embankment. There are also small areas of swamp and relict salt marsh and an extensive system of natural creeks and artificial ditches. RSPB conservation management over the period 1995-2005 led to the extension and enhancement of the wetland features leading to increases in most wintering and breeding bird species and the colonization of several new species. The provision of hides and other visitor facilities has provided for increasing numbers of visitors. Current estimates are that the site receives between 20-30,000 bird-watching visitors per annum.

The remainder of this document refers to the proposed 'extension areas' defined below. For further information about the existing RSPB reserve area please refer to the *RSPB Marshside Management Plan 2005-10*

## 1.2. Site designations

The entire area discussed in this plan, (including hard, artificial features such as roads and buildings), lies within the Ribble Marshes Site of Special Scientific Interest, (and Ramsar site), and the Ribble & Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area. The whole is designated as Green Belt and as a Site of Local Biological Interest in the Sefton Council Unitary Development Plan.

## 1.3. The 'Extension' areas

The proposed extension to the reserve discussed here consists of five elements:

- The saltmarsh to the north of the existing RSPB leased area extending out to the mean High Water Mark (excluding the area occupied by William Rainford Ltd), bounded to the north by the ownership boundary with Natural England and to the south by an imaginary line continuing the trajectory of Hesketh Road to seawards.
- The area of marsh, including the coastal lagoon, to the east of Marine Drive which is not already part of the RSPB's leased area and is currently subject to a License between the Council and William Rainford Ltd.
- The road verges that lie between the existing RSPB leased area and the surrounding roads (excluding the Highways reserved land).
- The Sefton Council-owned strip of, (ungrazed), land that lies between Marine Drive and the, (privately owned), Crossens Inner Marsh.

- The car park adjacent to the sand works on Marine Drive

### 1.4. Important habitats and species

The primary habitat is a fine example of actively developing **saltmarsh**. In addition to the intrinsic botanical interest, this area supports Internationally important high tide wader roosts, important breeding wader populations and significant populations of breeding and wintering passerines and wintering raptors. As the area is still actively accreting, poor drainage is a feature of the upper saltmarsh and semi-permanent pools are beginning to form close to the Marine Drive.

**Marine Drive** has created an unnatural obstruction to the previously natural transition between freshwater and brackish habitats.

Inland of the road the **Coastal Lagoon** and **Swamp** habitats are heavily modified by human intervention but despite this still support considerable wildlife interest. The Coastal Lagoon is particularly important during drought periods and freezing conditions when its size and depth ensure that it is often the only significant water body available to birds in the area. The ungrazed swamp and areas of higher ground provide valuable nesting opportunities for wildfowl within a largely grazed landscape.

The **Highway Edges** primarily consist of ungrazed grassland of varying wetness, together with patches of *Salix*, (and other), scrub. These are important habitats in their own right, with a few botanically rich areas and the whole providing nesting habitat for wildfowl, (e.g. shoveler, teal), and key passerine species, (e.g. linnet, reed bunting).

These key habitats and species are summarised in Table 1.

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**Table 1 Important natural features**

Important feature	Influencing management?	
Ungrazed Saltmarsh	✓✓**	SSSI Interest Feature. RSPB priority habitat. BAP priority
Wintering waterfowl	✓✓**V	SSSI/SPA Interest Feature.
Breeding waders	✓✓**	SSSI Interest Feature. RSPB FD111 priority species.
Wintering and breeding passerines	**	Linnet, reed bunting and skylark are BAP priority species
Coastal lagoon	** V	BAP habitat. RSPB priority habitat
Phragmites/Schoenoplectus swamp	*	Important waterfowl and passerine breeding habitat
Coastal dune/strandline	*	Coastal sand dune is a BAP habitat.
Natterjack toad	*	BAP species. BHS re-introduction scheme
Water vole	*	BAP species. Possible re-introduction scheme linked to re
Bird spectacle	V	Wintering waterfowl; breeding waders, including avocet
Car park	V	Potential to develop visitor facilities
Road verges	V	Potential to develop visitor facilities

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### KEY

\*\* = Features, which are the prime, reason for RSPB maintaining the reserve and which will drive its management.

✓✓ = Features for which we have legal responsibilities (SSSI Interest Features) and which will influence the management we undertake at the site.

✓ = Features for which we have legal responsibilities (SSSI Interest Features) but which will not influence the management we undertake at the site.

\* = other important conservation features whose requirements we need to take into account when deciding upon management of the site.

V = Features of particular importance to visitors.

### 1.5. Human features

#### i. Public access

Marine Drive, Hesketh Road and Marshside Road provide vehicular access to the edge of the site. A small, (40-car), car park is situated adjacent to Marine Drive and the Old Sand-Works.

There is a bus service to Marshside Road (junction with Elswick Road).

There is (foot/cycle) access to the site perimeter at all times via the pavement along the Marine Drive sea-wall.

The Sand-Works Haul Road bisects the site and is well used by the public for foot access, especially at weekends in the summer months.

A rough, circular walking route has been created by birdwatchers around the base of the sand-works' screening banks.

#### ii. Visitor usage

The number of visitors using the car park must exceed 100,000 per annum. Bird watching is popular throughout the year, (the RSPB Reception Hide receives in excess of 20,000 visitors a year). Dog walking is discouraged on the existing reserve trail alongside Marine Drive but is frequent around the car park and especially along the Haul Road. This activity can have significant negative impacts on both nesting waders and high tide wader roosts when people allow their dogs to run freely across the marshes. Liaison with dog-walkers helps minimise this problem. A few people collect glasswort (*Salicornia*) from the pioneer salt marsh in late summer. Flying kites and model aircraft is an occasional activity that can cause serious disturbance to nesting birds. Off-road driving has become more common in recent years although Sefton Leisure Services do control the activity.

#### iii. Highways

Marine Drive defines the eastern boundary of the site. It was built in 1974 on a base of waste materials. The carriageways are regularly maintained by Sefton Council. The road is not designated as such but has become a (partial) Southport Bypass.

Marshside Road was widened and resurfaced in the recent past and has become a popular commuter route for motorists and an increasingly dangerous route for walkers and bird-watchers.

Both roads are a serious threat to the wildlife (e.g. at least three short-eared owls, *Asio flammeus*, were killed by traffic on Marine Drive in the winter of 2003/4).

#### iv. Commercial activities

Sand-winning has now ceased and much work has already been undertaken to restore the area formerly occupied by the sand works to its former natural state. At the time of writing, (September 2009), there remains much to be done. We understand that the sand company intend removing more material in the coming months but we are not aware of a timetable for this work.

### **v. Fishing**

The excellent access to the inter-tidal area provided by the Haul Road attracts various kinds of fisherman to Marshside. However, the use of this route by fishermen pre-dates that of the sand-winning industry. Marshside Road has been an access route to the sea for much longer still and fishing has been a major economic activity in the past. Nowadays, shrimping vehicles are rarely seen at Marshside and net fishing has become unusual. The only fishing activity that remains of significance is cockling. In some winters this has been carried out at industrial levels, albeit only for short periods. Regulation is by North Wales and North West Sea Fisheries and is well managed. However, access by cocklers is via the car park and this is often disruptive and potentially dangerous to other users and damaging to the fabric of the car park.

### **vi. Wildfowling**

Took place on the salt marsh to the north of the sand works up until 2000. There have been no recorded incidents of armed trespass since that date. Wildfowling continues on the Natural England owned National Nature Reserve land immediately to the east.



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**Table 2: Important human features**

Important feature	Importance to management	Impact and issues
Car park	Access	Focal point for visitors at the centre of the reserve and Currently in very poor condition; has a negative impact
Haul road	Access	Foot access to saltmarsh for dog-walking etc.: a safety
Old Sand works	Neighbour/user	Now defunct Restoration of the site to saltmarsh is underway RSPB have an interest in developing the site as a centre
Highways	Access	Good access for visitors/users Negative impact on wildlife (collisions) Negative impact on human enjoyment (noise, visual
Birdwatching	User	Low key activity at present; currently no interpretation
Fishing	User	Specialist; declining except cockling which can have Right of access for vehicles along Haul Road (license Services)

## 2. EVALUATION AND RATIONALE FOR MANAGEMENT

### 2.1. Conservation: important features; their condition and the main factors affecting them

The primary **habitat** is a fine example of actively developing **saltmarsh**. This requires little active management and should probably remain either ungrazed or very lightly grazed since it is one of very few examples of ungrazed saltmarsh in Northern Britain. If accretion continues at current rates, it may be appropriate to review this policy in the future as the higher salt marsh may then benefit from light grazing to improve its biodiversity. The existing grazing, (by wildfowl), already has beneficial effects on habitat diversity.

The internationally important **high tide wader roosts** and nationally important **breeding wader populations** are vulnerable to disturbance: signage and interpretation should be a priority. An objective should be to endeavour to make the **bird spectacle** of the high tide wader roosts accessible to visitors whilst at the same time protecting them from unacceptable levels of disturbance.

Since the construction of Marine Drive, accretion rates have accelerated and caused the blockage of drainage culverts leading from the inner marsh and the severance of the natural transition between freshwater and saltwater habitats. The feasibility of reintroducing some form of controlled freshwater input to the saltmarsh will be further explored. The negative impacts of releasing bacteria-rich water into the tidal system could be minimised by the creation of shallow, 'settlement ponds' on the higher saltmarsh. This would create further coastal lagoon habitat with varying salinities and complement plans to encourage **natterjack toads** to colonize the area. Small areas of saltmarsh would be lost in this process, but this would be more than adequately compensated for by improvements in the diversity of wildlife in the area and by the restoration of the important transition habitats that were present in the original marsh prior to the construction of Marine Drive.

The existing **coastal lagoon** is an artificial construct. It represents a great opportunity for imaginative habitat management to increase its value to wildlife and further diversify the wildlife of the area. New species can be encouraged to exploit this enhanced habitat including, (potentially), common terns, ringed plover, avocet and sand martin.

- The **swamp** habitats are already heavily modified by human intervention and in places damaged by the dumping of large quantities of spoil. The potential here is to restore the area and create an exciting **reed-swamp** habitat that can perform two functions: provide a natural water treatment process for the poor quality water entering the site and
- diversify the wildlife of the area by encouraging BAP species to thrive (bittern, garganey, reed bunting and reed warbler are potential colonists).

The **highway edges** consist of un-grazed grassland and patches of *Salix*, (and other), scrub. These areas provide most scope for improving human access and enjoyment of the wildlife riches of the site. A perimeter ditch along the 'Crossens strip' would provide valuable habitat for a range of species, (especially nesting waterfowl, reed bunting and water rail), and provide both a 'wet fence' to restrict human access onto the marsh as well as spoil to create a dry path along the wetland edge. This could also be done on the seaward side of Marine Drive where excavation of shallow water areas could create spoil to provide an access 'berm' along the base of the road embankment. This could create a marsh-level path away from the noise of the road and enhance visitors' enjoyment of the site considerably.

### 2.2. Visitors and public affairs: important features; their condition and the main factors affecting them

This reserve extension provides a major opportunity for further **visitor development** at Marshside. Significant constraints on development will remain because of the sensitivity of this European-designated site and the absence of undesignated land. The acquisition of the **car park** area would increase the available infrastructure significantly. The major opportunity that is presented here is the availability of an exciting diversity of habitats within a short distance of the visitor focus. If all the proposals contained in this Plan were taken forward, there would be coastal lagoon, reedswamp, saltmarsh, coastal grassland and sand dune habitats all within 100 metres of the parking area.

A small **visitor centre**, sensitively constructed within the Old sand-works screening banks, could provide refreshments, toilets and interpretation. It would enable effective regulation and monitoring of access to the reserve and the adjacent inter-tidal areas. This would give safe **access** from the car park away from the road, and without the need to cross the road, and would facilitate the development of an education programme for all ages and abilities. **Viewing trails** could encircle the Old sand-works area and link to the existing reserve path network. An extension of the existing reserve trail could be formed along the base of the road embankment towards Crossens, providing a relatively peaceful, (i.e. away from the noise and fumes of the road), route through coastal grassland and wetland habitats, something that is not available to visitors to Marshside at present. This would assist with the ultimate aim of creating a complete **circular route** around the freshwater marshes. (See also **highway edges** above).

With the cessation of sand-winning, the Haul Road is now available for recreation. Its inclusion within the reserve area would enable more effective regulation of its use. Dog-walking, fishing and bird-watching would continue and the opportunity taken to inform these and other visitors about the sensitivities of the local wildlife. Off-road driving of vehicles of all types and some other undesirable activities would be actively discouraged. The regulation of these issues would be subject to the consideration and agreement of Sefton Council Leisure Services.

Additional **viewing platforms** could provide focal points for watching wildlife. Suggested sites include:

- the northern tip of the sand works peninsula

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- a position near the site of the old 'Wildfowlers' Car Park'
- a site associated with one of the two cattle tunnels connecting Crossens Inner and Outer Marshes (with the intention of adapting the tunnel to provide safe foot access across Marine Drive)

One of the two last mentioned could be the site for a 'Partnership Hide', since a hide here would provide views of both the National Nature Reserve and the RSPB Reserve.

### **3. LONG-TERM VISION, OBJECTIVES & MANAGEMENT**

#### **3.1. Long-term vision: what we would like to see at Marshside in 25 years time**

Marshside Nature Reserve has become a nationally renowned centre of excellence for wetland management. It has become both the southern gateway to a larger RSPB landholding, rich in wetland biodiversity, which extends throughout the Ribble Estuary and is the northern gateway to the suite of nature reserves running south along the Sefton dune coast.

The saltmarsh and associated habitats are managed in 'favourable condition' to maintain the continually high numbers of wintering waterfowl and form an important sanctuary within the estuary. Numbers of breeding waders and wildfowl and their productivity are maintained to provide a source of colonisation for newly developed coastal wetlands within the wider estuary. Black-tailed godwits have colonised as a breeding species. Other biodiversity gains have been achieved by restoring transitional brackish conditions to parts of the higher salt-marsh together with some shallow pools; by extending and enhancing the coastal lagoon habitats and by a small but significant expansion in reed swamp. This has led to the expansion of the water vole population and the successful reintroduction of natterjack toads.

Marshside has become the key bird-watching destination in the Ribble area with 50,000 visitors p.a. using the expanded facilities. Visitor facilities provide a high level of customer care in keeping with the suburban setting and the large population that live within one hours' drive of the reserve. Interpretation introduces the wildlife and culture of the estuary, the processes of coastal change and the work of the RSPB. The salt marsh and the semi-natural succession to freshwater and grassland habitats form an educational tool to inspire new generations of conservationists through school visits and academic research.

## 4. RSPB MANAGEMENT AND INVESTMENT AT MARSHSIDE 1995-2005

### 4.1. Direct Investment

Estimate of value of RSPB Investment in Marshside Nature Reserve, April 1995 to April 2005: £500,000.

- Site Manager
- Volunteers (40+)
- New disabled access paths along the southern verge of Marine Drive to access both hides
- Maintenance of sea wall (fencing planting, grass cutting)
- Hydrological management including the installation of four pipe sluices, 5 km of ditches and four major new lagoons.
- 2,000 shrubs and trees have been planted.
- Wardening, signs and improved boundary features have dramatically reduced human disturbance.
- Visitor facilities have been created comprising two state-of-the-art birdwatching hides, one Viewing Platform, three Viewing Screens and 1km of disabled access trail.
- All of the stock fencing (around 5.3 km) has been replaced.
- A further 2 km of grass paths and highways verges are regularly mown.
- Litter picking is carried out/ regularly cleared at no cost to Sefton Council.
- Regionally important breeding waterfowl populations have been sustained and productivity increased. Several new species have colonised the site as a result of creative habitat management (e.g. gadwall, teal, avocet)
- Internationally important wintering waterfowl numbers have increased (e.g. wigeon numbers are up from 5% to 20% of the total Ribble Estuary count).
- Events programmes, walks and talks by RSPB staff and publications such as *The birds of Marshside* have attracted more visitors to the area.

### 4.2. Indirect economic impact

- The site is maintained in 'favourable condition' at no cost to Sefton Council.
- RSPB research has shown that visitors to the reserves spend an average of £11 per head in the local economy as a direct result of visiting the nature reserve. On average, £35,000 of visitor spending supports one full-time equivalent job in the local economy. If the 20,000 visitors to Marshside spend £11 each they contribute a total of £220,000 to the local economy, which is equivalent to 6.3 jobs.
- Entrance to the reserve's facilities is free and this constitutes a significant benefit to Sefton's ratepayers at no cost to the Council.
- House values in the area are supported by the proximity of a quality environmental attraction in the local area.
- The local environment has benefited from improved safety, and a clean and well-maintained site of International importance for birds.

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- The Quality of Life of local people has been enhanced.
- Local contractors are employed to carry out maintenance work and capital projects.
- The Tenant Farmer has his traditional livelihood supported through the RSPB-led Higher Level Stewardship Scheme.

## 5.KEY AUTHORITIES, CONSULTEES AND OTHER INTERESTED BODIES

NB. *This is not a fully comprehensive list of everyone with an interest in the site and its management. The aim is to establish who are the key interested parties with whom consultation is a legal requirement or an essential prerequisite to successful management of the site.*

NAME	AREA OF INTEREST	CONTACT	DETAILS
Sefton Council	Owner/ Coast management	D. McAleavy	Head of Coast & Countryside
Sefton Council	Owner/ Sea defence	G. Lymbery	Special Projects Manager
Sefton Council	Owner/ Planning	A. Hall	Planning
William Rainford Ltd.	Neighbour		
Natural England	SSSI, SPA. Statutory Authority, NNR Manager	A. Kimpton	Senior Site Manager
Environment Agency	Sea defence Statutory Authority	G. Fellowes	Biodiversity Officer
NWNWSF	Fisheries/Access Statutory Authority		
Emergency Services	Police Fire Ambulance Coastguard		
Action Ribble	Estuary partnership	L. Cryer	Project Officer
Ribble Estuary Liaison Committee	Wildfowling/estuary liaison	I. Danby	BASC (Secretary)
Sefton Coast Partnership	Coastal partnership	E. Jackson	Chairperson



## **REFERENCES**

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**Marshside RSPB Nature Reserve Management Plans 1995-2000, 2000-2005, 2005-2010.** RSPB. T. Baker

**RSPB Marshside Perimeter Plan.** RSPB T. Baker April 1996

**A Review of the RSPB Marshside Perimeter Plan.** RSPB T. Baker July 2001

**'A Vision for Visiting'; Draft Marshside Visitor Plan.** RSPB T. Baker March 2003

**Summary Management Plan for 'Rainfords' Marsh'.** RSPB T. Baker January 2003

**RSPB Management Plan Guidance Notes version 6** RSPB August 2004

**The Saltmarsh Creation Handbook** RSPB Albert Nottage & Peter Robinson 2005

**Communications, Interpretation and Visitor Product Development Strategy for the Sefton Coast** Sefton Council 2005

**Access Strategy for the Sefton Coast** Sefton Council 2004