



# The Wash

National Nature Reserve



## Welcome to The Wash NNR

The Wash is one of England's last great wildernesses, a place where you can enjoy true tranquillity, as well as the excitement of some of England's great wildlife spectacles.

The Wash National Nature Reserve is the biggest reserve in England, covering over 8880 ha. It's also the most important wetland site in the UK, with its vast mudflats and huge expanse of saltmarsh supporting thousands of birds all year round. In winter, the Reserve attracts large numbers of wildfowl including pink-footed geese, brent geese and shelduck, while in the summer, waders and seabirds come here to breed. The Wash is also one of the best breeding areas in England for common seals.



© Natural England

Common seal

## History

The Wash that we see today is a remnant of the much larger Fenland Basin, which once stretched back to Peterborough and Cambridge. In the 10th century it was a wild and dangerous place inhabited by a ferocious race of people known as the Fenland Tigers, who fought tooth and nail to repel Norman invaders.

It was in this enormous marsh too that, legend has it, King John lost his entire baggage train, when it was overcome by a fast rising tide in 1216. The Reserve is dedicated to the memory of Sir Peter Scott, a great conservationist and son of 'Scott of the Antarctic'. He lived at East Lighthouse, a Grade II\* Listed Building on the banks of the River Nene, during the 1930s.

## Management

For centuries the saltmarshes of the Wash were traditionally grazed by cattle, sheep and horses. Today, this is limited to around half of the marsh as part of a management plan that produces areas of short grass, that attract ducks and geese during the winter, and also areas of tussocky vegetation, which are preferred by breeding birds like redshank.

## Volunteering

There are lots of opportunities for volunteering at the Wash NNR, including conservation management, wildlife monitoring, office duties, and helping with events. A new Friends of the Wash NNR has also been established. For details about this, and volunteering opportunities, contact the Natural England outreach officer on 01553 818503.

## Learning and education

Natural England's outreach officer runs a range of guided walks and activities throughout the year. For events in the East Midlands see the Events for Special Family Days under Let's Go Wild! at [www.naturalengland.org.uk/millionchildren](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/millionchildren)

There is also a variety of curriculum-based educational programmes based on the Wash. These are available as field trips to the Reserve, or part of a visit to the Green Quay. They can also be delivered in the classroom. For more information please email [sonia.reveley@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:sonia.reveley@naturalengland.org.uk) or call 01553 818503

© Natural England

Tidal mudflats

## How to get here

The Reserve spreads across the southern reaches of the Wash and can be accessed by car along minor roads from the A17, between King's Lynn and Sutton Bridge.

The main car parks are at: Kirton Marsh – accessed from small roads from Kirton. Point Green – accessed through the King's Lynn Dock. A council-run car park – at East Lighthouse (also called Guys Head).

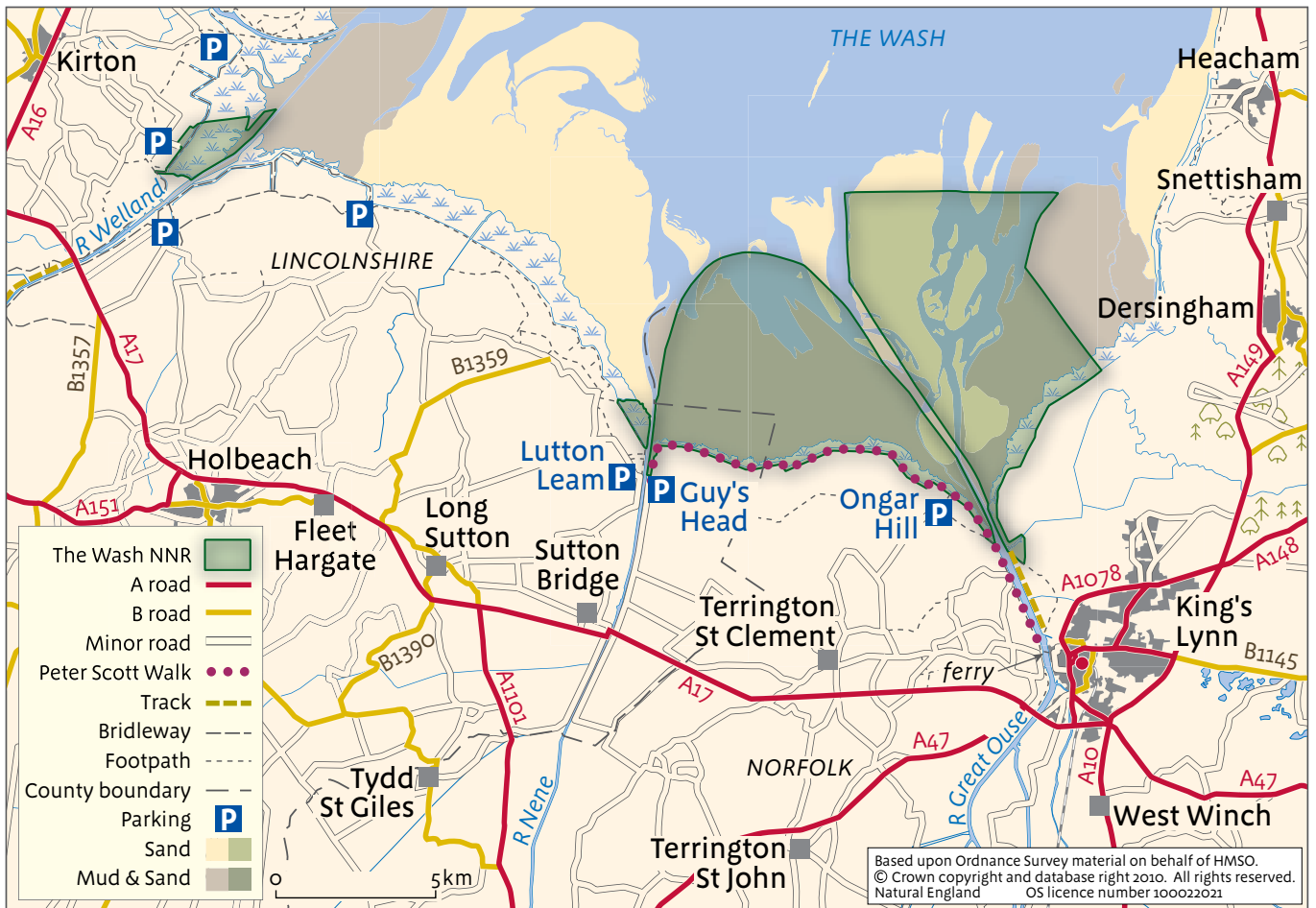
The nearest train station is King's Lynn. Bus services along the A17 between King's Lynn and Sutton Bridge are provided by Norfolk Green and Cavalier Travel. However, the stops are a long way from the Reserve.

There is good cycle access, with cycle stands at both Kirton and Point Green. King's Lynn is on the junction of National Route 1 and National Route 11 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network.



Heron

© Natural England



## Facilities

The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are in Sutton Bridge and King's Lynn, on the Great Ouse. There is a picnic area at the Guy's Point car park.

### The Green Quay [www.thegreenquay.co.uk](http://www.thegreenquay.co.uk)

The Green Quay in King's Lynn is a visitor centre dedicated to the Wash and wider Fens. As well as regular events and exhibitions, there is also a popular café and toilet facilities.



## Visiting

A number of footpaths and trails allow access to the reserve from local towns and villages.

The **Peter Scott Walk** runs along the coastline within the reserve between the mouth of the River Ouse to the River Nene, where it connects with another major trail, the Nene Way. The walk offers easy access but is not suitable for wheelchairs.

The circular walk up to **Point Green** begins at a small car park at the end of a rough track leading from the port in King's Lynn. From here there is an easy access track that leads to a boardwalk that takes you out on to a stunning area of saltmarsh. There are some interpretation panels there, too. The path then leads to the point where the River Babingley joins the Great Ouse – an excellent place for bird watching.

**Kirton Marsh**, near Boston, is one of the oldest and most extensive stretches of saltmarsh on the Wash and adjoins the RSPB Frampton reserve. It became part of the NNR in 2005. There is a large car park with interpretation boards and disabled access to a screen hide overlooking a pool on the grassland.



© Natural England

Broadwalk at Point Green

## Living landscape

The Wash and its surroundings have been shaped by man since Roman times. The rivers that flowed into the Wash once followed slow, meandering courses, depositing successive layers of silt in their estuaries and along the shores of the Wash. This caused the rivers to frequently flood the surrounding marshland.

However, the Romans, medieval monks and finally Dutch engineers straightened the rivers, drained the fens and built banks to protect the land from floods. Up until the 1970s, large areas of saltmarsh were enclosed by earth banks and converted into agricultural land, and today the Wash is totally enclosed by artificial sea defences.

Fishing and wildfowling are still important activities, while busy Fenland ports such as King's Lynn and Boston, were once among the most important in the country, and traded furs and timber with the countries around the Baltic Sea.

Looking out onto Terrington Marsh, the skyline is dominated by two circular banks. These were part of a trial in the 1970s to create an offshore freshwater reservoir which would have ultimately covered much of the reserve. However, thankfully the plans were never realised.

## Saltmarsh

Saltmarshes are one of the most important natural habitats in England, with around 10% of the country's saltmarsh found in the Wash.

It's a vital habitat for migrating birds, with plants such as saltmarsh grass offering grazing for wintering birds like brent geese and wigeon, while the seeds of sea purslane, sea blight and samphire, provide food for flocks of teal, twite and linnet.

In spring, much of the marsh is covered with the white flowers of scurvy grass, while in summer other salt-tolerant plants such as sea aster and sea lavender attract hoverflies and butterflies. Birds such as redshank, skylark and reed bunting feed and nest here too.

When the tide covers feeding grounds further out in the estuary, the saltmarsh also provides valuable high tide roosts for birds like curlew, oystercatcher, knot and dunlin.

Of course, wherever you find large flocks of birds, you also find aerial hunters. Peregrines, merlins and harriers are all frequent visitors to the Wash, while short-eared and barn owls use the sea wall and saltmarsh as hunting and roosting areas.



View of estuary mudflats at low tide

© Erica Olsen / FLPA

## Sand and mud

Intertidal mudflats teem with life, and the Wash is famous for the vast numbers of worms, shellfish, shrimps and other small crustaceans that live here.

This protein-rich gloop attracts enormous numbers of migrants wading bird which arrive in the autumn to take advantage of this rich feeding ground.

Spectacular numbers of pink-footed geese also arrive from Iceland and Greenland in early winter, and many roost on the offshore banks of the reserve.

The Wash also supports one of the largest populations of common seals in England, and Seal Sands is one of the biggest basking sites along the English coast. Boat trips to see the seals are available daily during the summer from Hunstanton.

Under the waves, the Wash plays an important role as a nursery for fish, notably plaice, sole, cod and whiting.



Birdwatchers on shingle beach, looking across mudflats

© Erica Olsen / FLPA

## Please follow the Countryside Code

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs.
- Leave gates and property as you find them.
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home.
- Keep dogs under close control.
- Consider other people.

More information about the Wash and upcoming events and activities can be found at the Green Quay centre:

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

The Reserve phone number is: 0300 060 4702

**Front cover image: Tidal mudflats near Snettisham**

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The logo for Natural England, featuring the words "NATURAL ENGLAND" in a bold, sans-serif font. "NATURAL" is in a light green color and "ENGLAND" is in a darker green color. The text is set against a solid light green square background.

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