

## Castle Water and Rye Harbour

A large coastal reserve with vegetated shingle, grassland and water features

One of the most important conservation sites on the Sussex coast Rye Harbour Nature Reserve has been recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area for birds, and as a Special Area of Conservation under the EU Habitats Directive. This reserve is managed by East Sussex County Council and owned by Environment Agency, private landowners and Sussex Wildlife Trust. Much of the site management is undertaken by a dedicated team of volunteers from the Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

The information centre at Limekiln Cottage, situated on the private road that runs alongside the river estuary, is the place to stop to gather the latest information on wildlife or special events at the reserve. Here is also a good place to view the land called Rye Harbour Farm which is managed by the Environment Agency for the new sea defences. The pits created by this are already attracting many birds and there is also potential for saltmarsh re-creation.

### Highlights

Great bird-watching at any time of year, with frequent rarities. Scarce saltmarsh and shingle plants. Many specialised and unusual insects.



sandwich terns

Nearby is a bird-watching hide overlooking a new area of saltmarsh that always attracts some waders, such as redshank or lapwing (the list of rare birds that regularly appear at Rye Harbour is very impressive, so it's always worth keeping a eye out). This is the perfect spot to get really close views of birds usually only seen at a distance, and is a great introduction for the novice bird-watcher. Flanking the river, behind the cottage, the saltmarsh supports such unusual plants as sea-heath and marsh mallow, and even highly specialised insects including the star-wort moth and saltmarsh bee.

The nature trail continues towards the coast and the sequence of shingle ridges that have developed over the last 200 years. Only specially adapted plants that can cope with the arid, almost soil less conditions and salt-laden winds can survive here. Plants such as the yellow horned-poppy and the rather succulent-looking sea-kale are dotted about the shingle, as well as the beautiful and sea pea with its purple and violet flowers on leafy stems that hug the ground to keep out of the wind. Vegetated shingle like this has become a rare habitat as it is easily destroyed by trampling feet or the remorseless re-structuring



yellow horned-poppy



sea pea

of sea defences. The shingle also provides nesting space for birds such as the ringed plover, which rely on camouflage to protect their investment among the egg-shaped, egg-coloured stones. The little tern nests here too, but extra protection in the form of electric fencing is needed against marauding foxes and badgers. There is a large pool overlooked by two hides, which has a nesting black-headed gull colony, together with some of the rarer Mediterranean gulls, and common and sandwich terns and all manner of ducks and wading birds.

The reserve surrounds private farmland and some large water-filled gravel pits, but the nature trail continues around to the north to Castle Farm and Castle Water, with the imposing fortress of Camber Castle standing proud on old shingle ridges. The fields nearby are grazing marsh, intersected by water-filled ditches teeming with dragonflies, beetles, molluscs and the now very rare and imposing medicinal leech. Barn owls or short-eared owls may be seen on winter afternoons drifting silently along the banks searching for voles.



bittern

Castle Water itself is a large, irregularly-shaped water body, featuring islands and fringes of reeds and willows, grassy or sandy margins — a diverse mixture of miniature habitats that is reflected in the great variety of often rare and even obscure plants and insects found here. The Trust purchased Castle Water in 1992 to enhance this wetland with its many rare species. In the last few years extensive shallow areas and more than a hundred islands have been created. Pochard, tufted duck, mallard, wigeon, teal, gadwall, shelduck and regular winter visitors such as smew, can all be observed from the comfort of a hide on the western flank of the water, but many bird watchers prefer to gaze from the viewpoint at the northern end of the lake. Here, at a winter's dusk, cormorants fly in to roost in the willows, squabbling among the branches for the best positions, soon joined by perhaps 50 or so little egrets, a cacophonous black and white spectacle before the setting sun. In recent years the rare and elusive bittern has roosted here, settling down into the small patch of reeds just before the willows in the last rays of the dying light.

Rye Harbour is a place of wide open spaces, big skies and large-scale vistas, but crammed full of atmosphere.



smew

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