

COUNTY: ESSEX

SITE NAME: PITSEA MARSH

DISTRICT: BASILDON

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Local Planning Authority: Basildon Council

National Grid Reference: TQ 735863
TQ 740870

Area: 94.63 (ha.) 233.83 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:500,000: 178

1:10,000: TQ 78 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1974

Date of Last Revision: 1974

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Part of the site is managed as a Country Park known as Wat Tyler Country Park.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Pitsea Marsh SSSI comprises a mosaic of habitats, including scrub, grassland, reedbed and fen, open water and saltmarsh. Geologically, the site is split into two. The grazing marsh dykes and reedbed lie on alluvial deposits, whilst the scrub, grassland and ponds are found primarily on London Clay. The reedbed in Pitseahall Fleet is the largest known in South Essex. The diversity of habitats supports an outstanding range of invertebrates, including a number of local and nationally rare damselflies, dragonflies, moths, flies and beetles.

Pitseahall Fleet was excavated in the 17th Century to construct the sea walls when Pitsea Marsh was reclaimed. The reedbed is dominated almost exclusively by common reed *Phragmites australis*, with some sea club-rush *Scirpus maritimus* reflecting the brackish quality of the water. Sea-milkwort *Glaux maritima* is frequent along the margins. The Fleet supports a typical breeding bird community which includes large populations of reed and sedge warblers, as well as providing an important feeding and roosting site for passage migrants such as yellow wagtails. It is one of the few Essex sites where cetti's warblers have been known to breed. The open water of the Fleet also supports such typical species as little grebe, coot and moorhen, as well as wildfowl.

Sea club-rush is abundant in the dykes of the surrounding marsh, together with floating sweet-grass *Glyceria fluitans*, thread-leaved water-crowfoot *Ranunculus trichophyllus*, celery-leaved buttercup *R. sceleratus* and fine-leaved water-dropwort *Oenanthe aquatica*. These dykes support the rare scarce emerald damselfly *Lestes dryas*, as do the numerous ponds within the Country Park.

The grazing marsh is dominated by perennial ryegrass *Lolium perenne* and bent-grasses *Agrostis spp.*, with such characteristic herbs as hairy buttercup *Ranunculus sardous* and grass vetchling *Lathyrus nissolia*. The tussocky turf attracts skylarks and corn buntings, whilst the winter flooding is of value to waders, especially snipe, and wildfowl.

The dense scrubland is composed of mixed blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, elder *Sambucus nigra*, rose *Rosa sp[p]*., wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare* and bramble *Rubus sp[p]*. The thickets are dissected by paths and glades of neutral to calcareous grassland. Herbs present in the grassland include yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor* and green-winged orchid *Orchis morio*. The combination of habitats

provides food and shelter for a wealth of invertebrates. Some of the rare or notable species include Roesel's bush-cricket *Metrioptera roeselii*, a harvestman *Leiobunum rotundum*, a fly *Xanthandrus comtus* and a ground beetle *Dyschirius impunctipennis*. Of additional interest are the birds which frequent the area, including breeding nightingales, a winter roost of long-eared owls, and migrant redwings and fieldfares which feed on the autumn berries.

On the saltmarsh which fringes the Park, there are three uncommon moths, rosy wave *Scopula emutaria*, mathew's wainscot *Mythimna favicolor* and star-wort *Cucullia asteris*.