

County: Essex **Site Name:** Upper Colne Marshes

District: Colchester and Tendring

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

Local Planning Authority: Tendring District Council/Colchester Borough Council

National Grid Reference: TM 022232 **Area:** 114.10 (ha) 281.94 (ac)
TM 050209

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1: 50 000: 168 **1: 10 000** TM 02 SW
TM 02 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): - **Date of Last Revision** -

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 20.5.1992 **Date of Last Revision** -

Other Information:

This is a new site. A small section was previously notified as part of the Colne Estuary SSSI.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The Upper Colne Marshes lie along both sides of the River Colne and Roman River, south east of Colchester. The site consists of grazing marshes with associated ditch and open water habitats, a series of tidal salt marshes behind old flood defence walls following a number of breaches, the sea walls themselves, and a small area of intertidal mud. It is considered to be of special interest as it supports an outstanding assemblage of nationally scarce plants and an unusual diversity of brackish ditch-types. Additional interest is provided by the terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates found within the site, and breeding and wintering birds.

The grazing marshes and sea walls are unimproved neutral grassland, much of which is species rich. The dominant grasses are Creeping Bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, Sea Couch *Elymus pycnanthus*, Meadow Barley *Hordeum secalinum*, Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, and the nationally scarce Sea Barley *Hordeum marinum*. Another nationally scarce species, Stiff Saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia rupestris* is locally frequent on the top of the sea walls. Other characteristic species include Mouse-eared Hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, Knotted Bur-parsley *Torilis nodosa*, Spiny Rest-harrow *Ononis spinosa*, Narrow-leaved Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus tenuis*, Hairy Buttercup *Ranunculus sardous* and Strawberry Clover *Trifolium fragiferum*, together with the nationally uncommon Divided Sedge *Carex divisa*, locally dominant Slender Hare's-ear *Bupleurum tenuissimum* and Dittander *Lepidium latifolium*.

Upper Colne Marshes (cont...)

The grazing marshes within the SSSI are managed in a variety of ways leading to subtle differences in botanical communities. For example, Wivenhoe Marsh has not been grazed for many years and is now dominated by Dittander. Parts of the Hythe Marshes have been cut for turf in the past, and this has resulted in a more level habitat, though still with Sea Barley and Hairy Buttercup. On less modified parts of the marsh, ant hills produced by the Yellow Meadow ant *Lasius flavus* are present: these provide a well-drained micro habitat which supports a number of different plants including the nationally scarce Upright Chickweed *Moenchia erecta*.

The water courses which run through the grazing marshes range from fresh water to almost fully saline in nature. Where the water is fresh, the dominant plants include Common Reed *Phragmites australis*, Reed Canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea*, Floating Sweet-grass *Glyceria fluitans*, Hard Rush *Juncus inflexus* and Jointed Rush *Juncus articulatus* together with False Fox-sedge *Carex otrubae* and Hairy Sedge *Carex hirta*. In those dykes with a significant salt water content, Sea Club-rush *Scirpus maritimus* is dominant, and the nationally scarce Brackish Water-crowfoot *Ranunculus baudotii* is frequent. A recent assessment of these ditches in relation to others in Suffolk and Essex suggests that this site is one of the two best in North Essex for its range of brackish ditch-plant communities. A freshwater pond by Hythe Marshes is of additional interest with dense stands of Greater and Lesser Reedmace *Typha latifolia* and *T. angustifolia*.

Salt marsh is the other major habitat type within the SSSI. There are small areas of primary saltmarsh outside the sea wall especially on the north bank of the Colne. This marshland is dominated by Common Saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia maritima*, Sea Aster *Aster tripolium* and Common Sea-lavender *Limonium vulgare* with the nationally uncommon Lax-flowered Sea-lavender *Limonium humile* and large stands of Sea Wormwood *Artemisia maritima*. In places the marshes show a natural transition to a high marsh community dominated by Common Reed and Sea Club-rush and then to a natural scrub community with Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. It is one of very few sites in Essex where such a transition can be observed. The largest areas of salt marsh are secondary, that is they have formed in the twentieth century following sea wall breaches allowing tidal inundation of former grazing marsh. In terms of their plants they are similar to the primary marsh although with an increased dominance of Sea-purslane *Halimione portulacoides*.

Additional interest in this complex of coastal habitats is provided by invertebrates and birds. The nationally scarce Roesel's Bush-cricket *Metrioptera roeselii* is abundant throughout and a number of other uncommon insects have been recorded, including the ground beetle *Pterostichus macer*. Dragonflies and damselflies are characteristic of the fresh and brackish water and the diverse butterfly fauna includes the Essex skipper *Thymelicus lineola* and Common blue *Polommatus icarus*.

Breeding birds on the site include Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* and Reed and Sedge Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and *A. schoenobaenus*. Many other species use the marshes for winter feeding and on migration, including waders and wildfowl on the undisturbed mudflats at the mouth of the Roman River. Barn Owls *Tyto alba* and kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* regularly hunt over the grazing marshes, a reflection of the richness of the habitat for small mammals.

