

Saltmarsh and Mud

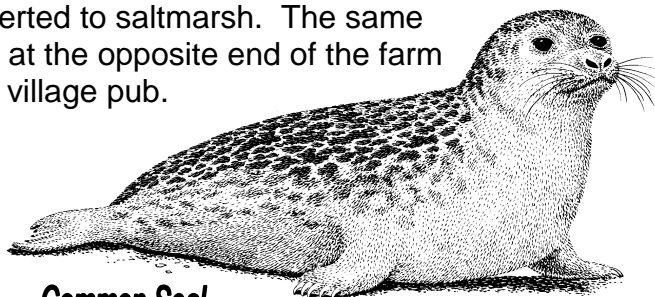
Between the sea wall and the river is a broken area of saltmarsh and a strip of intertidal mud.

The saltmarsh is badly eroded and this is evident in many parts of Essex as sea levels gradually rise and 'squeeze out' the saltmarsh against the sea wall. This is of great concern as the saltmarsh itself helps protect the base of the sea wall.

Intertidal mud is very valuable for wildlife, providing abundant food for oystercatcher, curlew, redshank, black-tailed godwit and many other species. In the river itself you will often see birds such as red-breasted mergansers and cormorant. Seals are occasionally seen feeding on the rich fish and invertebrate life of the estuary.

Bridgemarsh Island is seen from the eastern end of the farm.

It was also enclosed for grazing marsh; the old sea walls are clearly visible. Now overtaken by the sea it has reverted to saltmarsh. The same is true of the land at the opposite end of the farm to the west of the village pub.



Common Seal

Essex Wildlife is a charity that urgently needs the support of people who care about their county –

**Join us
Today**

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Visitor Guide to the Nature Reserve

Blue House Farm North Fambridge

This 660 acre farm on the north bank of the River Crouch was purchased by Essex Wildlife Trust in March 1998.

The farm is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and is internationally important for wildlife, particularly overwintering birds and also for coastal plants and insects.

The Trust is managing this working farm to conserve and increase the wildlife that it supports. This involves maintaining high water levels and balancing good livestock farming with good conservation practice.



Access

A circular route begins in the visitor's car park in Blue House Farm Chase. It follows a permissive footpath around the farm going to all three bird hides before joining the public footpath on the seawall. You can then follow the public footpath along the seawall to return to the car park. This route is about 4km long and can get very wet during the winter. No dogs are allowed on the permissive path to limit the disturbance caused to wildlife.

For a longer walk follow the sea wall footpath to Althorne (7.5 km), or Burnham on Crouch (14km) and then take the train back to North Fambridge station.

Please keep to the footpaths.

The Farmhouse

The land was originally divided into two farms: Blue House to the west and Hyde Marsh to the east. Blue House Farm included the farmhouse which is now occupied by the Trust's Farm Warden. Built in the 1800's, it was enlarged in the 1860's. The black cladding is recent following the 1987 hurricane.

Hyde Marsh Farm no longer exists, all that remains of the farmhouse are the foundations surrounded by several plum trees.

The Flat Fields

These are the fields behind the farmhouse which were drained and levelled in the past for arable crops.

The area has been grassland for the last 100 years and is used in the winter as a feeding ground by Brent Geese. Around 2,000 geese come to the area during the winter, and are often seen grazing on the short turf. They prefer these fertile, flat fields where they get lush grass and a good view of approaching predators.

Throughout the year hares are abundant across the farm but are most easily seen on the flat fields, as there is less cover for them to hide in.

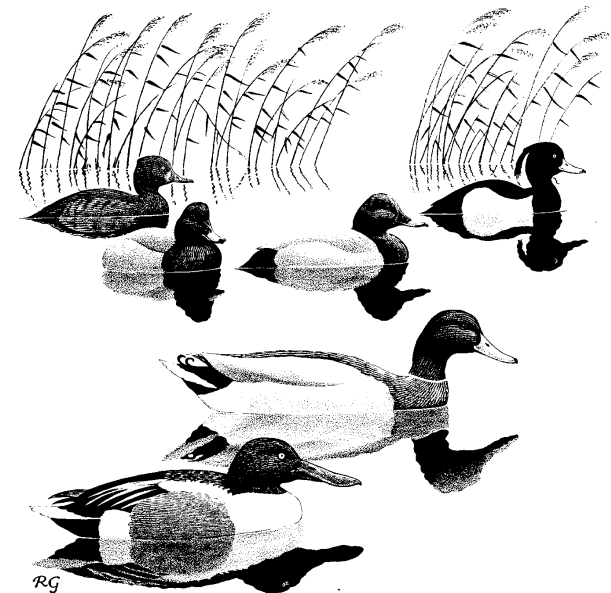
Skylarks also thrive here particularly in the hay fields where they nest, hidden in the long vegetation.

Sea Walls and Counter Walls

A sea wall follows the southern edge of the farm and protects the fields from the tidal River Crouch. In 1897 a high surge tide similar to that of 1953 breached the sea wall and flooded the farm. Two breaches are still evident today as the large bays along the sea walls known locally as the 'horseshoes'. Lines of wooden stakes are visible at low tide, they mark attempts to rebuild the wall along its original line. This was unsuccessful, the sea walls had to be built further inland.

The ditch behind the sea wall, known as the borrowdyke, was dug to provide clay for the construction of the sea wall. Some seawater seeps through the wall into the borrowdyke, encouraging brackish water plants such as sea club rush, soft hornwort and brackish water crowfoot to grow.

The interior of the farm is divided by earlier sea walls – counter walls – constructed to prevent flooding of the fields from the central stream. They were first built around the higher fields to protect the more valuable farm land. These counter walls became less important when the current line of the sea wall enclosed the whole farm.



The Fleets

The two expanses of open water beyond the flat fields are known as the fleets. They formed when the farm was still saltmarsh, by water draining off the marsh at low tide. They were the last areas of the farm to be enclosed from the sea, and are therefore surrounded by counter walls.



Gadwall

The most inland of the fleets dries out during the spring and summer, exposing wet mud on which wading birds feed. The fleet nearer the sea wall is deeper staying wet all year round, it supports diving ducks such as tufted duck and little grebe. Our smallest duck, the teal, and our largest the shelduck, are both commonly seen here. At high tide wading birds move onto the fleets from the mudflats beyond the sea wall.

Arable Reversion

When the Essex Wildlife Trust purchased the farm, it came with 90 acres of arable land. In the autumn of 2004 this was sown with a mixture of native grasses, to revert it to permanent grassland. This area, being on higher ground, has been planted up with over 1km of hedge plants and is now grazed with livestock. It supports breeding yellow wagtails as well as the occasional grey partridge. Coastal plants such as grass vetchling are now returning to the fields as the nutrient levels fall.

Traditional Grazing Marsh

Most of the pasture on the farm has never been ploughed for arable crops. It retains many of the features of the original saltmarsh, such as winding drainage creeks and the countless hollows and bumps often topped with large anthills of the meadow ant. The creeks and ditches are important habitats for rare water beetles and other insects like the hairy dragonfly and scarce emerald damselfly.

Those ditches with thick vegetation support water voles and may, in time, again give shelter to otters which are known to have lived here until at least 1963.

The fields here attract wading birds such as redshank, curlew and snipe which feed on animals within the boggy ground. This area has also been heavily drained, raising and controlling water levels will encourage more wetland birds to feed and nest.

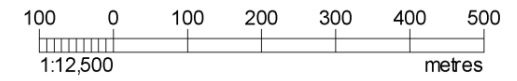


Water Vole

Flooded Fields

Fifty acres of the farm, adjacent to the railway line, are flooded every winter with the aid of a windpump. This creates a feeding area for over wintering wildfowl and wading birds; it is particularly well used by wigeon and teal.

In the spring as the water levels drop, bare mud becomes exposed, which supports a lot of insect life. Lapwing and redshank chicks both eat insects, and this area has brought breeding lapwing and redshank back on to the farm.

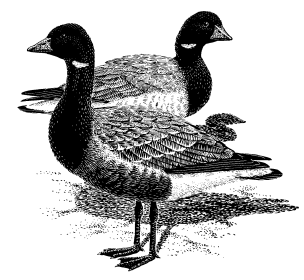


To B1012

Fambridge Station

To London

To Southminster



Brent Geese

Over
Railway

Flooded
Fields

Arable
Reversion

Hide

Hide



Fleet

Fleet

Fleet

Hide

Cuckoo Marsh

North Fambridge
Village



Car Park

Ferry
Boat
Inn

Public Footpath
to Burnham
10km

Public Footpath
to North Fambridge
500m

River Crouch

-  Permissive Path (No dogs)
-  Public Footpath