



Somerset's Coast

4

Wildlife on the beach

LEFT

Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*, Porlock shingle bank, the landward side of the shingle bank has a mild microclimate and is a popular spot for butterflies.

RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, mouth of the River Parrett mudflats.

Haretail Grass *Lagarus ovatus*, Minehead Dunes.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* eggs, shingle bank, Wall Common.

Biting Stonecrop *Sedum acre*, Dunster Beach.

Six-spot Burnet moth *Zygaena filipendula* on Meadow Vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, Berrow dunes.





WILDLIFE ON THE BEACH

Much of the diverse marine life of Somerset's coast lies hidden beneath the waves, but the animal and plant life of the beaches and upper shores can be very conspicuous.

During the summer months the cliff tops, dunes and shingle banks have extremely diverse, sometimes exotic,

plant displays and many species of butterfly are associated with them. The summer and winter birdlife of the upper shores is equally varied and plentiful.

But there is no doubt that it is the extensive mud and sand flats, exposed when the tide goes out, that provide one of

the most dramatic wildlife sights found on this coast. Vast numbers of waders and wildfowl come here during the winter months to escape the harsh north European and Arctic winter, making this one of the most important and spectacular places for winter shore birds in the UK.

BIRDS OF THE SAND AND MUDFLATS

The intertidal zone

Waders and wildfowl occur on Somerset's beaches throughout the year but only during the winter months do large numbers of birds move in from areas north and east of the UK.

From Brean Down west to Minehead, the entire 43-km sweep of sand and mud that is exposed at low tide provides rich feeding grounds for a wide range of shore birds that make this their regular wintering area.

The mouth of the River Parrett, lying between Burnham-On-Sea and Steart, also provides significant additional winter bird habitat along the coast, as do the much smaller rivers, the Axe and the Brue. The River Parrett is a major estuary feature within the vastly bigger Severn Estuary. In addition, sandy Steart Island and other shifting sandbanks that come and go in the mouth of the Parrett combine to create good feeding areas and safe roosting places for gulls, ducks and waders.

These glistening mudflats can be covered with thousands of birds. Up to 80,000 geese, ducks, waders and gulls can be found feeding across the Severn Estuary in the depths of winter. They feed on small crabs, marine worms, shellfish, fish

and algae that are exposed as the tide rapidly drops away.

As well as being used by long-distance travellers like Wigeon *Anas penelope* from Russia and Dunlin *Calidris alpina* from Iceland, these mudflats are also feeding grounds for many local birds including Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* and Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*.

The numbers of birds that come to the Somerset coast depend upon the severity of the weather elsewhere. Bridgwater Bay has its own regular site-faithful ducks and wading birds that fly in to the same beaches and mudflats year after year. But these regulars are joined by other winter visitors if the weather is harsh in the north and east of the UK. Birds that have travelled from northern Europe to winter on east coast sites such as the Wash in East Anglia, will move to Bridgwater Bay if temperatures drop well below normal winter levels or if snow sets in on the east coast. The winter climate on these south-west coastal beaches is usually considerably milder than on east coast beaches.

In addition, if inland freshwater areas on the Somerset Levels start to freeze, many hundreds of ducks including Shoveler *Anas clypeata* and Pintail *Anas acuta*, move to the coast to feed on the rich algae and microscopic invertebrate 'soup' found in shallow water at the tide's edge.

The importance of this coast to the bird life of Britain and Europe is recognised through a series of designations that have been given to it. The Bridgwater Bay Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) forms the core area of these extensive sand and mudflats, covering 3,574 hectares, and runs from Brean Down to Lilstock. A major part of this SSSI also forms the Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve. An area larger than the SSSI has also been identified as important from a European perspective and is a Ramsar Site, a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). These European SPA and SAC designations have meant that the area has also been further designated as an Important European Marine Site (EMS).

