

RX Wildlife



www.RXwildlife.org.uk

RX is the fishing boat registration used at Dungeness, Rye and Hastings

**Wildlife sites from
Hastings to Romney Marsh**



Numbers on map refer to the page number for that site

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Within 20km of Rye there is a variety and quality of countryside that is hard to beat.

This booklet describes sites you can visit to see some of the special plants and animals, but of course some wildlife can be found anywhere in the area – you just have to start looking.

Some of the sites listed have leaflets, web sites, information centres and birdwatching hides to help you get the most out of your visit. Furthermore, there is a range of activities to help you learn more, from guided walks, to family events, illustrated talks and organisations to join – see page 47 for further details.

Tucked away in this little corner of East Sussex and Kent, the climate is generally mild and sunny with a low rainfall. It rarely snows, but it is often windy. This benign climate and geographical position means that some species just reach us from the continent – we are on the edge of their range.



There is a mosaic of many different habitats. Some, like vegetated shingle, saltmarsh, saline lagoons and reedbeds, are rare and declining in Britain and Europe, so we have special responsibility to protect and manage them for their wildlife.

The coast ranges from the sandstone cliffs at Hastings with its wooded gills and cliff top heathland, through the ancient submerged forest of Pett Level, then the shingle beaches of Rye Harbour, to the muddy estuary of the river Rother, and the sandy beach and dunes at Camber to the great mass of shingle pebbles that forms the Dungeness peninsula. Throughout the area vast expanses of open water have been created by the extraction of shingle. This has created valuable wetland habitats, including saline lagoons and reedbed.

Inland there are the five river valleys of the Marsham, Pannel, Brede, Tillingham and Rother, plus the expanse of wet grassland of Pett Level and Romney Marsh, the 45km of the Royal Military Canal and hundreds of kilometres of ditches. On the higher ground there is heathland at Hastings Country Park and several great woods at Brede, Guestling and Beckley. Farming is a significant influence in this landscape with sheep still dominating, but arable crops and orchards add to the mosaic of habitats.

This wildlife-rich countryside is also full of history, with defences against invasion – castles, Martello towers, listening mirrors and blockhouses – and defences against the sea. There are harbours that have silted up and tales of smuggling. It has a rich maritime history, including a tragic lifeboat disaster

at Rye Harbour, with the loss of 17 men with the Mary Stanford in 1928.

This is an area to enjoy all year round: every season has its wildlife highlights. During winter storms the coast can be an exciting place, with waves crashing on to the beaches bringing all sorts of flotsam and jetsam. Cold weather may bring many birds from the continent, seeking our milder climate. Spring and autumn are the main periods of bird migration when it is easy to find many species, sometimes over a hundred! Fine summer weekends can make the coast, especially at Camber, very busy, but even at these times it is possible to find solitude and wildlife along the network of footpaths inland.

Wildlife designations

There are several national and international designations for wildlife sites in the area and in the text they are abbreviated.

- SSSI** Site of Special Scientific Interest, a national designation for wildlife and/or geology interest.
- SPA** Special Protection Area, a European designation under the Bird Directive.
- SAC** Special Area for Conservation, a European designation under the Habitats Directive.
- LNR** Local Nature Reserve.
- NNR** National Nature Reserve.
- AONB** Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Area

In this guide we have chosen to use hectares (ha.) but you can multiply by 2.5 to convert to acres.

January and February

Winter brings ducks, including Smew to the larger pits. Mute Swan and Bewick's Swan numbers peak on oil-seed rape fields.

Bittern and Water Rail frequent the reedbeds and Cetti's Warblers often call from deep inside the thickets.

Offshore rafts of Red-throated Diver, Great Crested Grebe, Common Scoter and auks can be found all along the coast.

On the cliffs at Hastings and Pett, Fulmar return to their ledges.

On warm days Skylark and Ringed Plover are often seen displaying and rookeries are noisy with nest building. But, even on cold and windy days, woodlands can be pleasantly sheltered and you may find wintering Chiffchaff, Firecrest and Blackcap.

Skylark



Ringed Plover



March

Early in the month the first returning summer birds such as Chiffchaff, Wheatear and Sandwich Tern can be seen, then a few Sand Martins and Swallows.

Offshore there may be a spectacular migration of Brent Geese and other wildfowl.

The first butterflies and bumblebees are busy feeding on early flowers such as willow.

By the end of March, birds such as Grey Heron, Cormorant and Mistle Thrush will have young.

April

This is the main month when lambs are born on the marsh, where their bleating forms a nocturnal chorus with the Marsh Frogs, which start calling (or laughing) by the end of the month. Our outstanding seabird colonies, at Dungeness and Rye Harbour are soon established and the wetlands echo to their calls too. Common, Sandwich and Little Tern all find strongholds here, but our gull colonies should not be ignored. The northward passage of waders is well under way, with Whimbrel numbers peaking at over 300 in the last days of the month.

Bushes near the coast are sometimes covered with white webs of the hairy caterpillars of the Brown-tail Moth – do not touch as they may irritate your skin. Leave them for the Cuckoos to eat!

Many woodlands are carpeted by spectacular displays of Bluebells and Wood Anemones and a few have Early Purple Orchids.

Look out for Yellow Archangel in hedgerows.

May

With Swift and Spotted Flycatcher arriving in the first few days, all of the summer migrants are back, and bird breeding is in full swing. Everywhere is full of the sounds of birds, especially at dawn. Chiffchaff, Skylark and Cuckoo are the easy ones to recognise. But Nightingale, Blackcap, Whitethroat and Garden Warbler are also singing away. Young waders, such as Lapwings and Redshank, appear in the wetlands and on the shingle and Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher chicks can be seen. With hungry young to feed Barn Owls are often out hunting in the evening light.

Many moths are on the wing, including the day-flying Silver Y, Burnet and Cinnabar moths. Hairy Dragonfly is the first to appear on the wing. Sea Kale is bursting into flower creating great white domes on the coastal shingle and the hedgerows are full of flowering Hawthorn.

Medicinal Leeches are actively searching vertebrate blood in the ditches and gravel pits, including frogs and geese.

Barn Owl



June

Breeding Black Redstart, Peregrine, Rock Pipit and Dartford Warbler are on the cliffs and cliff-top areas of Hastings Country Park.

The seabirds will have chicks now and the endless toing and froing of the adult birds adds to the already noisy colonies. Numbers of Lapwing and Curlew increasing as birds already return from their northern breeding grounds.

This is a special month for flowers and many orchids will be in flower, including Bee and Pyramidal.

July

Often regarded as a lean month for birds, but in good years there may be many young seabirds.

There are many flowers out and it is a good time for Medicinal Leeches and Water Voles.



Bee Orchid

August

This is the best time to look for migrant waders as they travel from the Arctic to Africa. This is the month when all manner of off-course migrants turn up, though many are in confusing young or transitional plumage. Ducks too are moulting and thus in a drab plumage of browns and buffs. Late flowering plants include the very rare Least Lettuce at Rye Harbour and the more common Viper's Bugloss.

Bumble bee colonies are large and active with lots of honey, often dug up and raided by Badgers.

September

Many summer birds are departing. They sometimes occur in huge numbers, with martins and swallows gathering on wires and the reedbeds full of warblers.

A time of plenty, with fruits and berries – try tasting some of the wild Blackberries, or the orange fruits of Sea Buckthorn on the sand dunes.

The striking Wasp Spiders are at their largest, swollen with eggs and gorging themselves on grasshoppers and bush-crickets amongst rough grassland and roadside verges.

October

On some mornings, thousands of birds migrate over the headlands. Large diurnal migration of finches, Meadow Pipits, and wagtails especially noticeable from high ground at Hastings Country Park and Pett. The nocturnal migration of Redwing can be heard by their high-pitched calls. The seeds produced by flowers on the shingle attract large flocks of finches, especially Greenfinch, Linnets and Goldfinch.

Look along the shore after storms to find all sorts of strange animals washed up, such as Sea Mouse and Sea Potato. On the saltmarsh Rock Pipits return for the winter. This is a good time to see Short-eared Owls.

Hornbeam woodlands can be a spectacular yellow as the leaves change. Sweet Chestnuts can be gathered from the forest floor.

This can be a good time for fungi, but don't be tempted to try the field mushrooms unless you know **exactly** what you are picking.

November and December

Lakes begin to fill with wildfowl and flocks of grebes, scoters and divers gather in Rye Bay. Huge flocks of plovers roost on the levels, rising in amazing unison at the sight of a passing Peregrine or Harrier. Wild geese and swans gather on Romney Marsh.

Migrant thrushes arrive from the sea. Spectacular migration of Woodpigeons overhead, thousands sometimes tens of thousands seen flying overhead in large flocks on cold crisp mornings in early November.

Now that the woods are bare, it is easier to spot birds in the treetops and Fallow Deer running through the coppices.

After the first frosts, you can gather sloes from the hedgerows to make sloe gin.

Wigeon and Canada Geese



A stunning floodplain valley between Hastings and Bexhill.

Filsham Reedbed is one of the largest reedbeds in Sussex and sits within the Combe Haven Valley SSSI. It is a reserve of the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Nearby at **Glyne Gap** there is another small reedbed, low sandstone cliffs, a vegetated shingle beach and a large intertidal area.

For watching wildlife offshore **Galley Hill** is an ideal viewpoint.

Filsham Reedbed



Habitat, species and seasons

The valley is a mosaic of reedbed, fen, grazing marsh, freshwater ditches, willow scrub and woodland. In spring and autumn the valley is alive with migrant birds and rarities such as Woodchat Shrike, Radde's and Dusky Warblers have turned up in recent years. Bearded Tits, Cetti's Warblers, Water Rail and Little Grebes breed within Filsham Reedbed. Ruddy Darters, Hairy Dragonflies and Variable Damselflies can be found within the valley during summer and later, Migrant and Southern Hawkets can be found in large numbers. In winter Bitterns can be seen using the reedbed and large flocks of Pied Wagtails roost there at night. At Glyne Gap it is easy to find Purple Sandpipers amongst the Turnstone flock using the intertidal rock to feed. In spring the sandstone cliffs are alive with literally thousands of solitary bees and wasps, and Green Tiger Beetles. Galley Hill is an ideal vantage point for watching Harbour Porpoise and Bottlenose Dolphin, seabirds and visible migration throughout the year.



Cetti's Warbler

Access and facilities

Car park at Bulverhythe Recreation Ground, bus stop near the entrance to the car park along Bexhill Road. Nearest train station West St Leonards (1.5km to the east of Bulverhythe Recreation Ground car park). Boardwalk and viewing screens within reedbed. Car park at Glyne Gap along Bexhill Road on Hastings/Bexhill boundary. Public toilets within car park and café on the beach.

A picturesque area of ancient gill woodland, sandstone cliffs, heathland and farmland, sitting within the High Weald AONB and the Hastings Cliffs SAC. Spectacular views from the cliffs overlooking the coastline from Fairlight to Dungeness, with views of Folkestone and France on clear days. This stunning landscape has inspired many artists, most famously the Pre-Raphaelites. The cliffs here are rich in fossils and have produced many specimens of dinosaurs, pterosaurs, turtles, crocodiles and plesiosaurs and is one of only a handful of sites in the world to have produced early mammal fossils.



Green Tiger Beetle



Thrift

Species and seasons

Gill woodlands in spring are carpeted in Bluebells, Anemones and Ramsons. Violet Helleborines and Bird-nest Orchids can also be found amongst the woodland flora during summer. The gill woodlands support a healthy population of the declining Dormouse and are part of the national monitoring scheme for this tree dwelling mammal. In spring and summer the cliffs and cliff-tops are alive with bees, wasps and beetles including the conspicuous Lesser Bloody-nose Beetles, Green Tiger Beetles and *Cerceris* wasps. Autumn diurnal migration of Meadow Pipits, wagtails and finches is a conspicuous feature on the cliff tops and high ground with hundreds of birds passing overhead during early morning. Occasionally tens of thousands of Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins can be seen flying through, and the site has many excellent vantage points for watching migrating raptors. The scrub and gill woodland within the glens provides excellent habitat to look for scarce and rare migrants during spring and autumn. This is a very under-watched site and there is huge potential for discovering your own rarities during migration periods.

Access and facilities

There is a bus route from Hastings to Rye that stops at the Helipad Picnic Site and the Firehills entrance to Hastings Country Park (ask for Fairlight Church). The East Hill lift along Rock-a-Nore road takes you up to the East Hill entrance to Hastings Country Park. Car parks along Barley Lane, Helipad Picnic Site along Fairlight Road, and at Horseshoe Quarry and Firehills (entrance along Fairlight Road). There is a small visitor centre at the Firehills car park. There are two "access for all" trails near the Firehills car park. Toilets are located at the top of the East Hill lift, at the Helipad Picnic Site and at Horseshoe Quarry (Firehills). Café near the Firehills car park. Nearest train station is Hastings about 1.5km from the East Hill lift.

Firecrest



Ancient wetland protected by a shingle bank for more than six thousand years, but flooded during World War II to deter invasion. It is now protected from the sea by a large man made wall, but it remains a wild expanse full of sheep and winter waders. From the top of the sea wall you have a panoramic view of ...

Pett Shore A beach of sand, rock-pools, prehistoric forest, leading to sandstone cliffs with fossils of shark teeth and dinosaurs.

Pett Pools These four pools were excavated in 1947 for clay to build the sea wall and now they provide a safe home for grebes, ducks, rails, warblers and waders.

Pannel Valley (access along Royal Military Canal) Public footpaths and bird hides give views over some scrapes. There are three public hides. A reserve of the Wetland Trust.

Pett Level



Habitat, species and seasons

Wet grassland in winter attracts large flocks of wildfowl, feeding waders, birds of prey and evening roosts of starlings. The ditches that drain the levels are also “wet fences” to control sheep and cattle and are home to Water Voles and Marsh Frogs with plants like Arrowhead and Flowering Rush. The reedbeds are extensive around the pools and in the Pannel Valley and are frequented by specialities such as Bearded Tit and Cetti’s Warbler, Water Rail, Barn Owl and harriers. In autumn the levels attract great flocks of wagtails, martins and swallows that feed on the abundant insect life, then roost safely in the reedbeds at night.

Access and facilities

Excellent views of the pools and level from the roadside, but from the top of the sea wall you get to see the shore, cliffs and sea. A good network of public footpaths, so please don’t be tempted to explore through other farm gates – it will disturb the birds and livestock. Toilets and pub are in Pett Level village. General store at Winchelsea Beach.

Wigeon



Curlew



A mosaic of shingle, shore, saltmarsh, gravel pits and sheep grazing dissected by ditches, with a bit of history and geography thrown in. The shingle ridges are only 500 years old, compared with the 5,000 year old ridges at Dungeness. Large areas were excavated for shingle and this has left a network of gravel pits ranging from the saline lagoon of Ternery Pool to the freshwater of Castle Water.

Castle Water



Beach Reserve A large shingle beach full of birds and flowers with a level private roadway giving good easy access on foot. Two birdwatching hides overlook Ternery Pool and another overlooks the Wader Pool – all accessible to some wheelchairs. Owned by the Environment Agency.

Castle Farm and Water Around Henry VIII's Camber Castle are ancient shingle ridges and a large gravel pit, home to many water birds and buzzing with insect life in the warmer months. Castle Water is owned by Sussex Wildlife Trust and the farm is privately owned.

Habitat, species and seasons



Sea Kale

Such a choice ... with more than 430 species of flowering plants and 270 species of bird. Some are very rare species that you are unlikely to encounter, but many amazing flowers and birds are easy to find, identify and watch. The great shingle ridges are home to a wealth of specialised flowers that varies with distance from the sea. Near the shore are expanses of bare shingle with Sea Kale and Sea Pea, but further inland there is a thin soil that enables numerous tiny plants, like Subterranean and Hare's Foot Clovers to survive, and in places scrub of gorse and bramble to establish. Great birdwatching all year round, but breeding birds are exceptional with three species of tern, six ducks, five waders, and declining species such as Yellow Wagtail and Turtle Dove. In winter Smew and Bittern are reliable at Castle Water and large flocks of Lapwing, Golden Plover and Oystercatcher at the Beach Reserve. Spring and autumn are good for migrating birds, especially waders. The first few days of May can be the best, with large flocks of Whimbrel and godwits and perhaps Black Tern and Little Gull – with some effort you could find a hundred species in a day.

Access and facilities

Free introductory booklet available. There is a good network of public and permissive paths, giving good access from Rye, Rye Harbour, Winchelsea Beach and Winchelsea. Many options for circular routes.

There is a private road through the Beach Reserve that is good for cycles, pushchairs and wheelchairs, **but the road is used by heavy vehicles for sea defence work, mainly on weekdays from October to February.**

A large free car park at Rye Harbour village with a shop, café, two pubs and toilet with disabled facilities. Regular bus service from Rye. Information Centre 400m from the car park is opened by volunteers on most days from 10am to 5pm (4pm winter). Four birdwatching hides, including the one at Castle Water, are accessible to some wheelchairs. The Crittall Hide is fully accessible. Sound loops in two hides and at Information Centre. Electric wheelchairs and audio tours can be hired, but must be booked in advance. Contact 01797 227784.

Bittern



Black-headed Gull



A walk along the footpaths provides all year round interest. Not part of the Nature Reserve, but full of interest, the gravel pits are strictly private, but good for ducks and grebes, and can be viewed from the public footpath. The fields to the south are mostly owned by the Environment Agency and it will be interesting as they are converted from arable farmland to a new sea defence to protect two villages and industrial areas. This will also enable habitat improvements on a large scale with restoration of vegetated shingle, re-creation of saltmarsh and creation of saline lagoons and brackish marsh.

Rye Harbour Farm and pits



Habitat, species and seasons

Winter flocks of Corn Buntings, four species of owl, Kestrel, coveys of Grey Partridge and on the large pits flocks of diving duck, mostly Pochard and Tufted Duck, but usually a few Goldeneye. Bittern are also seen regularly in the fringing reed of the pits. In the spring the first Sedge Warblers, then Cuckoo, Yellow Wagtail, Whitethroat and Reed Warbler are all common here and later there can be large flocks of Swift, especially during cool weather in May. Flowers along the track include the tall yellow spikes of Twigg Mullein, the blue spikes of Viper's Bugloss and usually a few plants of the poisonous Henbane and Hemlock. In the autumn there is a good crop of Blackberries and Elderberries. Rye Harbour Farm is the site of a major sea defence project that will provide improved protection for local villages.

Access and facilities

Please park in the large car park in Rye Harbour village and keep to the footpaths. Public footpath extends along the length of these two areas and there are several paths leading down to the shore.

Tufted Duck



Yellow Wagtail



Very close to Rye, this intertidal area is grazed by sheep that keep the vegetation short – ideal for geese, gulls, ducks and especially waders. At low water the waders disperse along the rich mud of the Harbour of Rye, but as the tide rises they are forced up on to the saltings where you can get a clear view of them. A telescope is especially useful here where you cannot get close views.

Habitat, species and seasons

Autumn and winter are the best times to see large numbers of birds here. Lapwings dominate, but there are also many Dunlin, Redshank and more uncommon species like Ruff. It can be the best place to find rare wintering waders such as Common Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank.

Access and facilities

Within easy walking distance of Rye, but you must cross the river first, then follow the public footpaths – do not venture on to the saltmarsh, it will scare the birds! This route naturally leads on to Northpoint Pit.

Redshank



Lapwing



Along the roadside from Rye to Camber there are six gravel pits with some convenient parking areas and a cycle track. The largest is Northpoint Pit, but don't overlook the other five if you are looking for ducks, grebes and waders. Northpoint Pit is used for windsurfing, but some wildfowl are tolerant and find quiet places.

Curlew at Northpoint Pit



Habitat, species and seasons

The open water is good for diving ducks and grebes, especially in the winter. The margins are good for migrant waders, especially Greenshank and Common Sandpipers.

Access and facilities

Road and cycle track pass close to all pits and it is possible to follow circular routes using footpath and the cycle track. There is roadside parking adjacent to the larger pits.

Camber dunes and shore

A sandy beach with tall dunes behind is bound to attract many visitors on sunny days and it has all the typical seaside attractions. But if you avoid these busy times you may find a quiet place to watch waders on the beach or insects and flowers in the dunes.

Access and facilities

Several large car parks with options for circular walks taking in the shore, dunes, pits or even the Rother estuary.

Cerceris wasp



Large-flowered Evening Primrose



Scotney Gravel Pits

A huge gravel pit lying on the border of Kent and East Sussex is well worth a visit especially during the winter months for large numbers of wildfowl. Areas immediately to the east of Scotney are currently being worked and areas to the west and north will be worked in the next few years.

Habitat, species and seasons

In winter several thousand birds can be present including White-fronted and Bean Geese. It has played host to an impressive list of rarities such as Lesser Scaup and White-headed Duck. The county boundary cuts the pit in half, so be careful when reporting rare birds!

Access and facilities

Best viewed from the public road and is accessible at all times. Parking at several sites off the main road – but take care. National Cycle Route 2 runs along the south side of the pit and provides good birdwatching access.

Lydd Ranges

Seawards off the road is the vast expanse of the oldest shingle in the area – 2,000 years since the sea left. It is Ministry of Defence land, so out of bounds to the public, but is part of the Dungeness SSSI and has some amazing wildlife, including the dark hummocks of the Holmestone Holly wood. It can be viewed from the road.

Habitat, species and seasons

The turf in this area is rich in lichens, but in the early summer the most obvious species is Thrift which turns the shingle pink. On the shingle there are patches of low-growing Blackthorn bushes. This is normally a small tree, but at Dungeness the bushes stay low, hugging the shingle. This plant has an alkaline bark and the bushes support numerous lichen species, including some that are rare elsewhere in Kent due to air pollution. Further into the Ranges Holly bushes form an unusual type of woodland that is found nowhere else in the world and is thought to date back to Anglo-Saxon times.

Part of the largest area of vegetated shingle in Britain. This is a rare habitat that supports many rare species. It is of international conservation importance for its geomorphology, plant and invertebrate communities and birdlife. This is recognised and protected in large part through its conservation designations – NNR, SPA and SAC. The Nature Reserve is 1031 ha. and includes the RSPB reserve that is described separately. The shingle has a distinctive ridged appearance, with each ridge being a former shoreline. Viewed from above these ridges show you how this site has been built over the past few centuries by the sea, and the coastline is still evolving, trying to erode on its southern coast, and build up to the east. The area has a unique aesthetic appeal and character that is attractive to an increasing number of visitors. As part of the NNR, the Romney Marsh Countryside Project manages, in agreement with English Nature, land owned by Dungeness Estate and Shepway District Council.

Shingle ridges at Dungeness



Habitat, species and seasons

This is the youngest area of shingle on the Dungeness peninsula and has different plants to those found further inland. By the shore, Sea Kale and Babbington's Orache can be abundant. A ridge or two inland they are replaced by grasses, and further inland the grasses are replaced by Broom bushes, which at Dungeness grow in a low "spiky" form. Further inland on older shingle the Brooms die out and are replaced by a mix of low-growing flowering plants, lichens and mosses. Foxgloves may be numerous in this area. Each of these different types of vegetation supports a different array of insects and spiders, many of them rare. This makes Dungeness one of the best sites for these animals in the UK. As an example, the Nottingham Catchfly plants that grow near the old lighthouse are themselves an uncommon plant, but feeding on them are two even rarer moths, one of which, the White Spot, has its largest British population at Dungeness. During the early summer watch out for the distinctive Wheatear which nests on the shingle beach. The best time to see the vegetation is in May and June when the site is covered in a succession of flowers – yellow Birds Foot Trefoil, blue Viper's Bugloss, white Sea Kale and red Valerian. Later in the summer dry conditions tend to brown-off the vegetation.

Broom bushes



Access and facilities

Dungeness is a private estate with 90 houses, some have gardens that are not defined by fences. To avoid disturbing the residents please keep away from these properties and use marked tracks. The habitat is incredibly fragile and suffers from tremendous visitor pressure, so please park only in the designated places and do not drive or ride across the shingle. There are car parks at Lade, and near the Old Lighthouse at Dungeness. The NNR may be approached from Lydd or New Romney and is found on the road between Lydd and Dungeness. Bus service 12 from Folkestone or Lydd stops at the RSPB reserve entrance on request. Dungeness Point can also be accessed by the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway.

Sea Kale



Viper's Bugloss



RSPB Dungeness Reserve occupies some 984 ha. of the Dungeness peninsula, the largest shingle formation of its kind in Europe. The RSPB manages the restored gravel pits for the large number of wildfowl that visit in winter, such as Smew, Goldeneye and Pochard and for nesting seabirds such as Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls. Many other species, including waders and warblers, may be seen on their spring and autumn migrations. Some 450 species of plant occur here along with a fascinating array of insects and other invertebrates (including the Medicinal Leech). The great variety of wildlife at Dungeness and its strangely beautiful landscape make it worth a visit at any time of year.

Shingle pits and vegetation at Dungeness



Habitat, species and seasons

Shingle, restored gravel pits, reedbed, neutral grassland, natural pits/fen.

Spring and autumn – Sandwich Tern, Black Tern, Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Wheatear, Whinchat.

Summer – Garganey, Common Gull, Common Tern, Yellow Wagtail, Reed and Sedge Warblers, Whitethroat, Hobby.

Winter – Black-necked, Slavonian and Red-necked Grebe, Bittern, Bewick's Swan, Whooper Swan, Pintail, Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck, Smew, Kingfisher. Resident – Shoveler, Bearded Tit, Cetti's Warbler.

Access and facilities

The reserve is open from 9am to 9pm (or sunset if earlier).

The reserve and centre are closed on December 25 and 26.

Reserve entry fees: RSPB and RSPB Wildlife Explorer members free. There is a charge for non-members using the nature trail. Entry to the Hanson ARC site is free to all.

Disabled visitors can drive to four hides on the main site and can gain access to the Hanson ARC hide via a radar gate. All hides have wheelchair accessible windows.

Suggested routes: There is a circular walk of two miles starting at and returning to the Visitor Centre. At the Hanson ARC site two short linear walks lead to a hide and viewing screen.



Smew

In the shadow of the Nuclear Power Stations the observatory is a centre to record birds, especially during migration. Bird ringing and sea watching have been carried out here since 1952. The Observatory's main recording area is the south-eastern corner of the Dungeness shingle peninsular. Historically, bird migration studies formed the focus of the work of the observatory but in recent years interests have extended to include insects and plants of the area. A daily record is kept of all birds in the area and visitors are encouraged to help in this work. An ongoing ringing programme forms an integral part of these studies and ringers are welcome. Special emphasis is given to helping trainee ringers widen their ringing experience.

Access and facilities

The seawatch hide is really for "Friends of DBO" however in reality no-one is ever turned away. Several locals have keys and there is a key kept for general availability at the Observatory. The key needs to be returned after use. There is inexpensive accommodation available.

Gannets and gulls at "The Patch"



Frequented by good numbers of wildfowl, especially in winter. The pits are also home of the Listening Mirrors, massive and bizarre concrete structures, precursors of radar, that are now scheduled ancient monuments and were constructed as part of inter-war experiments to detect aircraft. The Romney Marsh Countryside Project manages the NNR on behalf of English Nature.

Habitat, species and seasons

During the migration seasons Little Gulls and Black Terns are frequent visitors. The pit supports a particularly large population of the rare and specially protected Medicinal Leech. These animals can feed on human blood but also feed on the large numbers of Marsh Frogs and Smooth Newts that occur in this pit. Between Taylor Road and Lade Pit you cross an area of shingle vegetation where the ridges, denoting former shorelines, are very obvious. The vegetation in this area changes from coastal grassland into broom scrub.

Access and facilities

Nearest car park is on Coast Drive, Lade, from where visitors should walk along Taylor Road and walk across the public footpath to view the South Lake from the causeway running along the edge of the lake.



Flowering Rush

This valley is a mix of grazing and arable farmland. The lower reaches towards Winchelsea are wide open green sheep pastures, frequented by Rooks and Lapwing, but the market garden at Snailham Crossing (TQ 861179) attracts a variety of small birds in winter, when Kingfisher and Green Sandpiper are typical along the ditches. Large corvid roost at Great Park Wood. Managed wetlands at Road End (TQ 890183) and either side of Brede Bridge attract wildfowl and waders. In summer, the hedgerows hold a variety of typical farmland birds eg Linnet, Whitethroat, Yellowhammer and Tree Sparrow. In spring and autumn, migrants can be found along Cadborough Cliff, and it's good for blackberries!

Access and facilities

From Rye, Winchelsea, Winchelsea Station, Udimore Church, Brede Bridge, Doleham Halt, Icklesham. The 1066 Country Walk runs along the south side of the valley, passing the Queen's Head pub, while Farm Conservation permissive footpaths give circular walks to include The Plough pub at Cock Marling (TQ 884187).



Brede Valley

A large tract of mixed woodland owned by Southern Water to protect the catchment of Powdermill Reservoir.

Evidence of an industrial past is present in the numerous bell-pits, from which iron-ore was mined, and the hornbeam coppice, which supplied charcoal for the furnaces. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, gunpowder was manufactured here, entailing some spectacular accidents. The reservoir was built in the 1930s to supply an expanding Hastings with drinking water. Former farmland is planted with conifers. Woodland to the north of the reservoir is managed for wildlife, with rides and clearings cut and blocks of heathland recreated.

Habitat, species and seasons

A good variety of woodland birds including all three woodpeckers, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Marsh Tit, Hobby, Crossbill, Siskin and Redpoll are often present and sometimes nest and it is one of the few sites in the area where Tree Pipit breeds. Mandarin Ducks nest in trees. Wonderful Bluebells and Early Purple Orchid in April/May. The scarce Wild Service Tree grows in the woods and in some nearby lanes. Fallow deer can often be seen. An excellent variety of fungi can be found in autumn. Butterflies include Silver-washed Fritillary.

Access and facilities

Car park at TQ 804206. The nearby Footlands Wood is similar and has a car park at TQ 764203.



Comma

Until the late 18th century, much of this large tract of forest was agricultural land. What we see now is a mosaic of ancient and secondary woodland, cut by steep, iron-stained gills running north towards the River Brede. Hidden at its heart are the remains of the second largest ironworks in the Roman Empire, where an industrial bath-house was buried beneath a mountain of cinders. But this is not the only secret of this little-known wood. In the mid-19th century, an ambitious arboretum was planted, comprising many unusual trees. Some of these remain as prodigious specimens, others are sick, while fallen giants rot among the undergrowth.

Habitat, species and seasons

A good range of woodland birds and fungi, but it is the extraordinary environment that makes this place special.

Access and facilities

A single public footpath runs through the wood. Look out for waymarkers and be careful when crossing the golf course. Park on the verge of the A2100 at Telham. The Black Horse pub is nearby.



Deathcap Mushroom



Chicken of the Woods

The Woodland Trust owns and permits open access to the northern half of this typical Sussex woodland, which is popular with families and dog-walkers. Mature Oaks stand above Sweet Chestnut coppice, which supplied fencing and poles to the hop industry which was once widespread in the region.

Habitat, species and seasons

The best bird habitat is along the northern fringe, where streams meet at an old reedbed. There are beautiful shows of Wood Anemone and Bluebell in April/May. Sometimes good crops of chestnuts in October.

Access and facilities

Car park in Watermill Lane TQ 864145, or walk from Guestling Church TQ 856145.

Coppice at Guestling Wood



Mixed woodland of old coppiced Hazel, Birch and Chestnut with Oak standards. There is also a stream running through the site with an associated pond, and an open heathy area under the powerlines. It is part of a larger woodland block, and the whole area is popular with locals for dog walking. A Sussex Wildlife Trust Reserve.

Habitat, species and seasons

Spring is the best time for woodland flowers including Wood Anemones and Bluebells, while the pond is a good place to see Palmate Newts. Later in the year Green Tiger Beetles can be seen in the sandy patches underneath the electricity pylons. Signs of Wild Boar are often seen, though the animals themselves are much more elusive. Good for woodland birds throughout the year.

Access and facilities

There are several lay-bys suitable for parking on Bixley Lane, a small unsurfaced road which joins the A268 on a bend two kilometres west of Peasmarsh. There are gates at the entrance to the reserve, and the many paths through the wood are fairly flat.

Bluebells



Wood Anemone



A 13th-century “new town”, with a distinctive grid street plan. Once a great port, now stranded as a wooded island far from the sea. Much of the land around the town is farmed organically by the National Trust. Enjoy a wonderful view up the Brede Valley from the old windmill site at TQ 901175.

Habitat, species and seasons

Jackdaws and Swifts nest in the old stonework, while the mature parkland trees hold the biggest rookery in Sussex plus Stock Dove, Woodpigeon, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, woodpeckers, Jays, Kestrel, Tawny Owl and even Grey Heron. Skylark, Yellow Wagtail and Corn Bunting can be found on the farmland in summer.

Access and facilities

Several footpaths lead down to Pett Level or the Brede Valley. On-street parking, public toilets, pubs, tea-shop, excellent butchers and village shop can be found in the town.

Roadside verge at Winchelsea



A beautiful, remote, silent area of typical old countryside, grazed by sheep, flanked by woods full of rookeries. The nearest place to the coast to see Buzzards. Feral Wild Boar live in the woods – their tracks are often to be seen in the fields.

Habitat, species and seasons

Rook, Jackdaw, Buzzard, Kingfisher. All three woodpeckers and Marsh Tit can be found in the woods. Large flocks of Common Gulls on the pastures in spring.

Access and facilities

Consult the OS map for walks in this area – the gate to Beckley Woods (TQ 855215) is a good starting point.



With 250 miles of footpaths and bridleways in the area it is easy to explore the countryside around Rye. Several long distance promoted routes focus in on Rye and are excellent for walkers wishing to enjoy the beautiful countryside and its wildlife.

1066 Country Walk – 31 miles

The 1066 Country walk meanders through stunning countryside between Pevensey and Rye, via the town of Battle. The trail follows in the footsteps of William the Conqueror who defeated King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, which in fact took place at Battle. The Rye to Battle section takes you through ancient towns, such as Winchelsea, past windmills and oast houses at Icklesham and along the Brede Valley into Battle Great Wood. Highlights on route include the fantastic view across the bay from Hoggs Hill windmill and Doleham Ditch for watching Banded Demoiselles during the summer months. There are many good country pubs on route, in particular the Queens Head, at Ickelsham, which has a fantastic view down the Brede Valley towards Rye.

There are also established links off the main walk to Hastings, Sedlescombe and Bexhill-on-Sea. The Hastings link path offers a good opportunity to visit Hastings Country Park and its coastal cliffs.

Train stations are located along the route and it is possible to walk from Rye to Battle (15 miles) in a day and catch a train back.

Royal Military Canal Path – 28 miles

The canal path follows the Royal Military Canal from Cliff End to Hythe on the edge of the Romney Marsh. The canal was constructed between 1804 and 1809 during the Napoleonic Wars as a defensive line along the edge of the Romney Marsh. During the early 1940s it was also re-fortified with pillboxes due to a further threat of invasion. The canal path offers a pleasant way to explore Pett Levels and the Romney and Walland Marshes. It is an excellent corridor for wildlife and you can often catch a glimpse of a Kingfisher as it darts along above the water. Mute Swans can also be found along the canal, with Pett Level being a particularly good place to see them gliding along the canal.

It is well worth stopping at the Pannel Valley Nature Reserve, which is just off the canal path as it crosses Pett Level. The bird hides there allow good bird watching all year round. Also, why not stop at Camber Castle and learn about this landlocked castle, which once protected the approaches to Rye.

Canada Geese near Camber Castle



High Weald Landscape Trail – 90 miles

This trail crosses the counties of West Sussex, East Sussex and Kent and provides an excellent way to explore the High Weald AONB. The route crosses from Rye to Horsham and gives walkers a chance to experience constantly changing terrain and views. As you walk out from Rye, to the surrounding orchards, there are fantastic views back along the Tillingham Valley and of Rye Church standing proud against the skyline. The route can take a week to complete and there are several public transport points on route allowing you to explore sections, without retracing your steps.

The Saxon Shore Way – 163 miles

The Saxon Shore Way runs from Hastings round the coast to Gravesend in Kent. The route follows along the coastline prior to the creation of the Romney and North Kent Marshes. As a result the route does not always follow the coastline you see today. The route is also rich in historical sites and follows the line of fortifications set up to protect the shore from Saxon raiding parties. There are panoramic views over the Romney Marsh from the escarpment that marks the ancient coastline between Folkestone and Rye. The route partly follows the Royal Military Canal from Rye before crossing up to the Isle of Oxney. Walking along this section you may hear the noisy mating call of the Marsh Frog, which escaped into the canal and surrounding ditches from a garden pond in Stone-in-Oxney in 1935.

Marsh Frog



National Cycle Network Route 2 runs from Folkestone in the east to Hastings in the west, and continues as far as Cornwall in the south west. For more information about the National Cycle Route visit www.nationalcyclenetwork.org.uk

There are some excellent locations for birdwatching along the cycle track which runs from Rye to Lydd and is part of NCN Route 2.

The Romney Marsh Countryside Project produces a pack of cycle routes – Romney Marsh Meanders. For a copy send a cheque for £3.95 (payable to Dover District Council) to the Romney Marsh Countryside Project, Romney Marsh Day Centre, Rolfe Lane, New Romney, Kent TN28 8JR. 01797 367934.

The Rye Bay Countryside Office produces a free booklet of on- and off-road cycle routes – Rye Rides – which is available from visitor information centres or the Countryside Office 01797 226488.

National Cycle Network Route 2 near Camber



The extraction of shingle has a major impact on the landscape south and east of Rye. This has destroyed the original wildlife value of the great shingle ridges, but it has also created wetland areas for plants and animals. The old workings were not dug out with wildlife in mind – but many areas have since been enhanced for that purpose. Work by several conservation groups has improved the pits by creating islands, re-profiling the steep margins and reducing disturbance.

The only current large scale extraction is taking place to the east of Scotney Pit by Brett Aggregates Ltd and by RMC just inland of The Pilot. The amount and range of habitats in this area will increase and improve over the next few years, and birdwatching is likely to get even better. Whilst the pits currently being dug have not been designed for wildlife or conservation, it is now agreed that this must be built in to future excavations and that some of these pits must be managed for conservation in the long run. The pits will help create ecological links with the nature reserves across the area and contribute to the re-creation of some of the wetlands that have historically been lost. Covering such a large area, it is likely that the complex of pits will include fishing and quiet water sports as well as conservation.

Recent work has been carried out at Dungeness and Rye Harbour under an EU Life-Nature project, led by the RSPB, called “Reedbeds for Bitterns”. Further enhancement, research, promotion and management of shingle habitat at Rye Harbour was funded by English Nature through Defra’s Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF). Access improvements across Romney Marsh have been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Website links

www.RXwildlife.org.uk

Latest sightings and events in the whole area, with up-to-date links to local websites, tides and travel details.

Information centres

Visits by school and other groups are encouraged at these sites. Please book well in advance to avoid disappointment.

RSPB Dungeness Visitor Centre The visitor centre and shop are open from 10am to 5pm (4pm November to February). Map reference: TR 084173.

Romney Marsh Visitor Centre Situated adjacent to the A259, just east of New Romney. Map reference: TR 077261. Open Saturday and Sunday, 11am – 4pm (or dusk if earlier, please call 01797 369487 to check).

Rye Harbour Nature Reserve Information Centre Lime Kiln Cottage, just a few minutes walk south of the large car park at the Martello Tower in Rye Harbour. Map reference: TQ 945 816. Open every day when volunteers available 10-5pm (4pm in winter, please call 01797 227784 to check).

Hastings Country Park Visitor Centre can be reached by car via the entrance off Fairlight Road. It is on the 344 bus route between Hastings and Pett. Open most weekends between 10am and 4pm in the winter and between 10am and 5pm in summer. It is also open most weekdays except Thursdays throughout the year and is staffed by Volunteer Rangers. Contact the Rangers on 01424 813225 to check opening times. Map reference: TQ 861116.

Rye Tourist Information Centre

For general visitor information including accommodation and public transport. 01797 226696. www.visitrye.co.uk

Public transport Trains

There is a train service between Hastings and Ashford with stations at Rye, Winchelsea, Appledore, Three Oaks, Doleham and Ore. Traveline – 0870 608 2 608. www.traveline.org.uk
The Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway runs between Dungeness and Hythe. www.rhdr.org.uk

Buses

The local bus service is good and provides a wide coverage. www.stagecoachbus.com
Traveline – 0870 608 2 608. www.traveline.org.uk

Ordnance Survey maps

Explorer 125 Romney Marsh, Rye and Winchelsea covers most of the area at 1:25,000
Explorer 124 Hastings and Bexhill covers the rest.

Local organisations to join

Wildlife Trusts – Kent and Sussex
Ornithological Societies – Kent and Sussex
RSPB – members groups in Hastings, Battle and Folkestone
Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve
Friends of Dungeness Bird Observatory
Pett Naturalists
Rye Natural History Society
Hastings and East Sussex Natural History Society

Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. English Nature supports projects that aim to increase biodiversity and/or conserve and enhance the geological and geomorphological features in areas affected by aggregate extraction. The funding comes from Defra, through a project at Rye Harbour Nature Reserve called **Rye Bay – enhancing and promoting a shingle environment** and includes the production of this booklet.

The following organisations have been involved in the production of this booklet:

Dungeness Bird Observatory
East Sussex County Council
English Nature
Environment Agency
Hastings Borough Council
Romney Marsh Countryside Project
RSPB Dungeness
Rye Bay Countryside Office
Rye Harbour Nature Reserve
Sussex Wildlife Trust
Wetland Trust
Woodland Trust



Supported through Defra's
Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund

Sea Kale at Rye Harbour

