

4b Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh

These wet grasslands are periodically inundated pastures or meadows in river floodplains or low-lying coastal areas, usually criss-crossed by ditches that maintain a high water level. The combination of grasslands and wetland margins or ditches promotes a richness of plants and invertebrates. They are generally grazed or cut for hay or silage. They also have an important role to play in controlling flood waters, and storing water that would otherwise run out to sea. Silt deposited by floodwater provides a natural organic fertiliser maintaining nutrient levels in the soil, which are depleted by grazing, hay and silage cutting.

Status

In 1994 a rough estimate of 300 000 ha of grazing marsh was made for the UK, with the majority, 200 000 ha, in England. However, only 5000 ha in England (10 000 ha in the UK) is thought to be semi-natural, with a high diversity of native plants. There have been severe losses of 37-64% of habitat areas in southern England since the 1930s¹. This region contains important areas in the Derwent Valley, on the Humberhead Levels and on the River Hull. This habitat is an important feeding area for waders and wildfowl in winter, including lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, curlew *Numenius arquata*, Bewick's swan *Cygnus columbianus bewickii* and whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus* and supports breeding waders and even corncrake *Crex crex*.

Threats

Insensitive flood defence works; agricultural intensification; a decline in traditional management; eutrophication; building development; saltwater flooding due to sea-level rise; groundwater abstraction; pollution and aggregate extraction.