

# COASTAL AND FLOODPLAIN GRAZING MARSH

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This priority habitat is particularly important for breeding, over-wintering and migrating birds, and relies on seasonal inundation.

**UK Priority Habitats covered by this statement:**

[Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh](#)

**Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan habitats covered by this statement:**

None

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*North Plain Farm, Bowness-on-Solway © Stephen Hewitt*

## Description

Grazing marsh is found on low lying alluvial and, occasionally, peat soils, around estuaries and along the floodplains of rivers. It is characterised by having a water table at or above ground level (flooding) for some part of the year. This seasonal inundation gives the vegetation a distinctive composition, with species such as Creeping Bent, Marsh Foxtail, Marsh Marigold and Silverweed. Most of these grasslands are moderately species-poor.

Ditches are important component in the grazing marsh ecosystem; often forming the field boundaries in this flat landscape. These can support a variety of marginal and aquatic plant species, including Greater Reedmace, Reed Canary-grass, Water Plantain, Broad-leaved Pondweed and sedges. These ditches also support a variety of animals including water birds like Moorhen and invertebrates such as the Blue-tailed Damselfly and Emerald Damselfly.

Grazing marshes are of major significance for breeding, passage and wintering birds. Typical breeding birds of grazing marsh include Redshank, Snipe, Lapwing and Yellow Wagtail.

In winter large numbers of Pink-footed Geese, Whooper swan, Wigeon, Teal, Barnacle Geese, Lapwing and Golden Plover feed on grazing marshes. Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and Twite may also frequent coastal grazing marsh during the winter months.

## Distribution and Extent

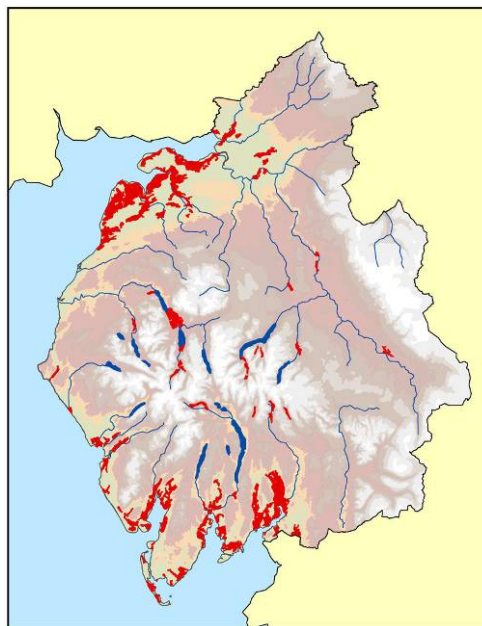
Extensive areas of coastal grazing marsh are found around the Solway Firth, Duddon Estuary and Morecambe Bay. Areas of floodplain grazing marsh are found along sections of the river valleys throughout the county and are particularly extensive in the Lyth and Winster valleys in South Cumbria.

## Conservation Issues

Grazing marshes are particularly threatened by ecologically insensitive flood defence works, agricultural intensification, including drainage and fertilisation, neglect in the form of a decline in traditional management and eutrophication, aggregate extraction, saltwater flooding due to sea level rise, inappropriate ditch management and overgrazing.

Large woodland planting on open coastal floodplain and grazing marsh is a potential threat to this habitat.

Onshore windfarms have the potential to result in significant numbers of bird strikes if sited on or near grazing marshes heavily frequented by wintering and migrating birds. These tall structures can also have significant adverse disturbance effects on bird species which require an open landscape and uninterrupted views.



*Distribution of grazing marsh in Cumbria  
(provided for illustrative purposes only)*

## Planning Considerations

- PPS9 states that local authorities should conserve important natural habitat types (priority habitats and habitats of principal importance in England), and identify opportunities to enhance and add to them.
- Any development that may impact upon this habitat, or its species interests, would require an assessment of the likely effects on the habitat and, as necessary, appropriate protection and mitigation measures.
- Any development in a river floodplain or flat coastal area may lead to direct loss of this priority habitat and its associated wildlife.
- This habitat is sustained by flooding for part of the year and any development that reduces the capacity to store water is likely to lead to flooding elsewhere, e.g. housing and industrial developments.
- Development adjacent to coastal and floodplain grazing marsh may impact upon the hydrological regime of the marsh.
- Development adjacent to coastal and floodplain grazing marsh may directly disturb sensitive breeding, wintering and migrating birds which use this habitat.
- Many waders require an open landscape and uninterrupted view, such that new buildings or other tall structures can reduce the suitability of land for these species.
- Windfarms can result in the death of wintering and passage birds due to collisions with turbine blades, and some species are susceptible to disturbance from these developments.
- The majority of grazing marsh lies outside the SSSI system.

## Enhancement Opportunities

- Protection of this habitat from development and creation of new areas in a planned and well-managed way can help to alleviate problems caused by flooding, and provide new facilities for public enjoyment.
- Grazing marsh can be re-created on agriculturally improved land through changes in the field drainage system, the introduction of ecologically sensitive ditch management and incorporation of the land into a less intensive farming system.
- Biodiversity Management and Enhancement Plans can be used for longer term developments, for the lifetime of the development.

## Habitat Targets

- Habitat targets for Cumbria can be found in a separate document “Habitat Targets, Planning Considerations and Enhancement Opportunities” available from [www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk](http://www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk) or by clicking [here](#)

## Key Species

The following Key Species could benefit from enhancement of this habitat, or be negatively impacted upon by inappropriate developments on or near this habitat:

Common Toad	Barnacle Goose	Yellow Wagtail
Great Crested Newt	Reed Bunting	Merlin
Natterjack Toad	Lapwing	Whooper Swan
Grass Snake	Hen Harrier	Skylark
Curlew	Tundra (Bewick's) Swan	Barn Owl
Short-eared Owl	Kingfisher	Water Vole
Peregrine Falcon	Golden Plover	

## Further Information

[UK BAP coastal and floodplain grazing marsh](#)

[Habitats of principal importance in England](#) Section 41 NERC Act list

[Buglife: habitat management advice: coastal and floodplain grazing marsh](#)

[Buglife: freshwater invertebrates](#)

[RSPB: wet grassland management](#)

[RSPB: managing water levels on wetlands](#)

[RSPB: managing habitats for wildlife](#)

[RSPB: Spatial Planning Guide for on-shore wind farm developments in Cumbria](#)

[Environmental Stewardship](#) and [HLS handbook](#)

## Contacts

- **Natural England**, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Rd, Kendal, Cumbria, LA9 7RL, Tel: 0300 060 2122, [cumbriaplanning@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:cumbriaplanning@naturalengland.org.uk)
- **Cumbria Wildlife Trust**, Tel: 01539 816300, [mail@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:mail@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk)
- **RSPB**, Campfield Marsh Reserve: Tel: 01697 351330, [campfield.marsh@rspb.org.uk](mailto:campfield.marsh@rspb.org.uk)

## Current Action in Cumbria

- The Environmental Stewardship Scheme run by Natural England provides financial incentives to manage land in a way that is sympathetic to its nature conservation interest with specific wet grassland options applicable to this habitat.