

COASTAL HABITATS ABOVE HIGH WATER

These priority habitats, formed by natural coastal processes, occur along the majority of Cumbria's coast. They provide positive opportunities for public access and enjoyment though this requires active management.

UK Priority Habitats covered by this statement:

Maritime cliff and slopes
Coastal vegetated shingle
Coastal sand dunes

Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan habitats covered by this statement:

Coastal habitats

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Dunes at Sandscale Haws © Stephen Hewitt

Description

Most of the **cliffs** along the coast of Cumbria are soft cliffs composed of boulder clay. More dramatic sandstone cliffs are found at St Bees Head, and there are stretches of Carboniferous Limestone cliffs around Morecambe Bay. The vegetation of the **boulder clay cliffs** is generally dominated by coarse grasses, particularly species such as Red Fescue, Yorkshire Fog and Cocksfoot. Plants such as Danish Scurvygrass, Sea Campion, Sea Plantain and Yarrow are frequent. **Sandstone cliffs** can support a rich maritime flora, which includes Sea Campion, Bloody Crane's-bill, Kidney Vetch, Thrift, Common Scurvygrass and Red Fescue. The upper slopes of these cliffs have thinner, more acidic soils and support acid grassland, heath and bracken. The cliffs at St Bees Head are important as the only site on the eastern Irish Sea for a variety of colonial seabirds, including Guillemot, Razorbill, Kittiwake, Puffin and Black Guillemot. The **limestone cliffs** also support maritime species such as Thrift and Samphire, and some uncommon species, such as Hoary Rock-rose and Spring Cinquefoil.

Shingle beaches form in high energy environments where the sea can move and pile up pebbles along the shore. Where the coastline is very exposed to wave action or human activity vegetation is unable to develop, but where there is some protection from these forces distinctive plant communities develop.

Characteristic species include Sea Holly, Yellow Horned-poppy, Sea Kale, Oysterplant and Isle of Man Cabbage. Areas of shingle can provide sites for colonial nesting birds such as Terns, Gulls and Eider Duck, as well as Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover. They also support a number of rare invertebrates.

Sand dunes develop behind large sandy beaches which dry out at low tide, allowing sand grains to be blown onto the land by the wind. Sand dunes show a characteristic sequence of zonation which is determined by their position on the shore, mobility and age. **Embryonic and mobile dunes** occur mainly on the seaward side of a dune system where sand deposition is occurring. They support very few plant species, the most characteristic being Marram grass. **Semi-fixed dunes** occur where the rate of sand accretion has slowed but the surface is still predominantly bare sand; Marram is still common but there is an increasing number of other species.

Fixed dune grassland forms largely closed swards where the surface has stabilised and some soil development has taken place. Calcareous fixed dunes support a particularly wide range of plant species, including Wild Thyme, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Kidney Vetch. In acid conditions acid dune grassland or dune heaths develop. Dune heaths are usually dominated by heather, but sometimes by lichens. **Dune slack vegetation** occurs in wet depressions between dune ridges; often characterised by Creeping Willow and marsh orchids.

Sand dunes in Cumbria are important for a wide range of rare or uncommon plants and invertebrates and host 50% of the British population of Natterjack Toads which breed in pools within dune slacks.

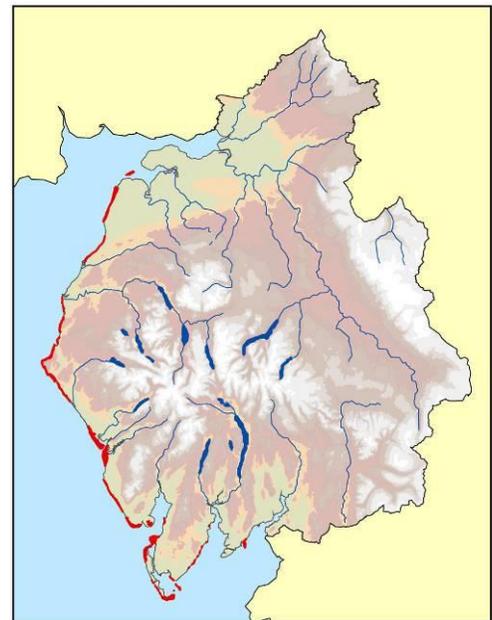
Distribution and Extent

Boulder clay cliffs and slopes are present along the west Cumbria coast from Maryport south to Silecroft, except at St Bees Head where sandstone cliffs occur. Limestone cliffs are more restricted in extent, being most prominent at Humphrey Head, near Grange-over-Sands.

Vegetated shingle is a rare habitat, though unvegetated shingle is more widespread. The main areas in Cumbria are on Walney and Foulney Islands, with smaller areas elsewhere along the west coast and around the Solway Firth.

Major sand dune systems are to be found at the mouth of the Duddon Estuary (including Sandscale Haws and Haverigg Dunes), Drigg Estuary (Ravenglass and Eskmeals Dunes) and between Silloth and Maryport.

These coastal habitats, though by their nature relatively narrow strips, could be more extensive, and any measures to release more land for coastal habitat creation and public use would be positive.



*Distribution of coastal habitat in Cumbria
(provided for illustrative purposes only)*

Conservation Issues

Shingle banks and sand dunes are both highly dependent on the natural coastal processes of erosion and deposition for their continued existence. These processes can be disrupted both by coastal defence works and offshore aggregate extraction. Such works can have an effect many miles down-current of where they take place and can result in changes in vegetation composition or loss of habitat.

Recreation, including visitor pressure, can damage vegetation through trampling and erosion, and may cause disturbance to wintering, breeding and migrating waders, wildfowl and sea birds.

Agricultural improvement, including the use of fertilisers, herbicides and ploughing and reseeded, remains a threat to the survival of cliff top grasslands and dunes, whilst appropriate grazing levels are also important in the maintenance of vegetation communities.

Planning Considerations

- Any development that may impact upon these habitats, or their species interests, would require an assessment of the likely effects on the habitat/species and, as necessary, appropriate protection and mitigation measures.
- These coastal habitats occur in locations frequently favoured by golf course, caravan site and wind farm developments. These can result in direct habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and isolation, and disturbance of wildlife.
- Onshore gravel extraction can lead to the direct loss of vegetated shingle and can disturb migrating, breeding and wintering wader and wildfowl roosts,
- Marine sand and gravel extraction can change patterns of deposition, threatening the continued survival of dune systems and shingle banks. Impacts on the local environment from development some distance away can be significant.
- Any development adjacent to these coastal habitats can disturb breeding, wintering and migrating waders and wildfowl either by direct disturbance from the development itself or from increased public use, particularly dog walking.
- Development in the vicinity of soft cliffs (and other habitats) can lead to demands for coastal protection works which can impact upon natural coastal processes, including preventing the natural erosion and slumping of soft cliffs which maintains their characteristic vegetation.
- Creation of facilities for recreational activities, such as dirt bike or mountain bike tracks, results in erosion and damage to habitats, as do the activities themselves.
- The majority of coastal vegetated shingle, sand dune and maritime cliff habitat in Cumbria is designated as Special Area of Conservation or SSSI, but coastal soft cliffs and slopes are largely outside the statutory designation system. Some are County Wildlife Sites.
- Any development that may have a significant effect, directly or indirectly, on a Special Area of Conservation would need to be assessed under the Habitats Regulations.

Enhancement Opportunities

- The principal opportunities for enhancement of these habitats will be those which (a) allow the restoration of natural processes, (b) reduce disturbance to habitats and birdlife through effective people management and (c) promote habitat restoration through changes to agricultural management.
- Developments should seek to enhance coastal habitats, through appropriate planning conditions and obligations. In particular maximising the potential to re-create habitat, particularly coastal heath, on agriculturally improved land adjacent to the coastal strip.

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:

Spiked Speedwell	The Northern Colletes	Linnet
St. Bees Seed-eater	Great Crested Newt	Little Tern
Northern Dune Tiger Beetle	Natterjack Toad	Reed Bunting
Small Blue	Adder	Short-eared Owl
Grayling butterfly	Viviparous Lizard	Skylark
Wall butterfly	Herring Gull	

Further Information

[Planning and Development for Protected Sites and Species](#)

[Managing Priority Habitats for Invertebrate](#)

[Planning, Development and Conservation for Amphibians and Reptiles. ARCTrust](#)

[Protected Sites Information. JNCC](#)

[Countryside Stewardship Scheme](#)

Contacts

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- **RSPB**, St Bees Head Reserve: 01697 351330 Email: stbees.head@rspb.org.uk

Current Action in Cumbria

- The Countryside 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 coastal habitat options applicable to this habitat.