



➔ Further information about the East Coast Nature Reserve is available from BirdWatch Ireland HQ and the BirdWatch Ireland website, [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)

# Reserves

## County Wicklow: East Coast Nature Reserve

**Dave Suddaby** describes the attractions of the reserve at Blackditch, Newcastle, Co Wicklow

BirdWatch Ireland's East Coast Nature Reserve in Co Wicklow extends to over 92 hectares (227 acres) and lies within the Murrough Wetlands complex.

This wetlands complex stretches for 13 kilometres along the coastal strip from Kilcoole Station, east of Kilcoole village, in the north to Wicklow town in the south, and extends inland for up to one kilometre in places. This extensive area is designated as a **Special Protection Area** under the EU Birds Directive due to its special conservation interest for several bird species. The area is also designated as a **Special Area of Conservation** under the EU Habitats Directive, and as a **Natural Heritage Area** due to its special habitats and wildlife interest. Our reserve area, located in Blackditch just outside Newcastle, is incorporated within these designated areas.

Since the East Coast Nature Reserve became established in 2004 – with funding support from the **EU LIFE-Nature** programme – a range of habitat restoration works, including wetland creation and woodland management, has been completed. The reserve opened to the public in 2009.

### Exploring the reserve

The reserve supports a wide range of habitats, supporting a great variety of plants and animals. It is becoming increasingly important for a wealth of wintering waterbirds, including Wigeon, Shoveler, Teal, Greylag Geese, Little Egret and Kingfisher.

The management and development of the reserve has been ongoing, and visitor facilities have been provided. These include an extensive network of **raised boardwalks** through marshy habitats, as well as three well-located **observation hides**, which offer wonderful views of what the reserve has to offer.

In summer, exploring the reserve is possible from defined **circular walkways** of varying distances and grades. From either a short walk or the full circular walk through the fen and wet woodland, the reserve can be enjoyed, taking in the raised boardwalks and observation hides along the way.

Walking at a steady pace, you can



circumnavigate the whole reserve in a handy four hours.

### Spring and summer

An early morning or late evening summer visit can offer a wonderful chorus of bird song – unusual species such as **Grasshopper Warblers** and **Reed Warblers** or **Spotted Flycatchers** are regularly heard. As day turns to night, the strange 'drumming' sound of displaying **Snipe** or the 'squealing pig' sound of singing **Water Rails** can often be heard emanating from the wetter areas.

By day, the vast array of typical grassland and woodland breeding birds are augmented by a great variety of butterflies

and dragonflies. Looking carefully ahead while on the boardwalks can reveal basking **Common Lizards** and maybe signs of **Otters** foraging.

It is also worth scanning the skies as raptors are regularly seen, with **Buzzard**, **Kestrel** and **Sparrowhawk** the most commonly recorded. But check carefully for a migrant **Hobby**, a species which is often seen in late summer, hunting the large dragonflies.

### Autumn and winter

As the summer turns to autumn, southerly migration along the coast starts in earnest and this can be witnessed as hundreds of **Swallows** and **martins** pass along the coastal fields.



During the summer period, the fen area is grazed and the grasslands are managed through cattle grazing, which is particularly important to ensure optimal habitat for the wildlife. Then, during the autumn period, the water levels within the watercourses are raised to provide shallow flooded areas over most of the grasslands. These are in anticipation of the returning **swans, geese** and **ducks** from their Arctic breeding grounds, and they provide a suitable safe feeding habitat for them over the winter months.

During this time the pathway along the coastal fields is closed to reduce the disturbance to the birds. However, the evocative whistling calls of **Wigeon** amongst the throngs of **ducks** and **waders** can be enjoyed from the main observation hide or from the coastal bank between Six Mile Point and Five Mile Point.

Again, scanning the skies for raptors, you may see a **Hen Harrier** at this time of year, or a **Merlin** dashing by, and there is the possibility of a **Short-eared Owl** hunting over the fen areas.

## What we are doing for the East Coast Nature Reserve

BirdWatch Ireland's aim is to manage our nature reserves for birds and wider biodiversity and showcase them as the best examples of key bird habitats in Ireland. Reserves can provide a real contribution to the conservation of priority species and, where practicable, provide natural places for people to enjoy. To accomplish this, local branches play an important part and your support is vital in helping us with our aim.

Our management aims at the East Coast Nature Reserve are to:

- Further enhance its key nature conservation interest
- Enhance wintering and breeding bird numbers
- Encourage Lapwing to return as a breeding species
- Provide safe feeding and roosting areas for wintering waterbirds
- Enhance the wider value of wildlife

- Provide a positive visitor experience
- Encourage more visitors, without compromising the wildlife value, to enjoy the spectacle that the reserve provides.

## Visitor information: How to find us

### By car or bike

The reserve is located to the east of Newcastle village, approximately 5 km south of Kilcoole. The main entrance is towards the end of Sea Road at Six Mile Point, where on-road car parking is available at the end of Sea Road.

Alternatively, park at Five Mile Point and access the reserve via a walk through the woodland. Access and parking is currently free of charge.

### By public transport

The area is served by Dublin Bus services, route number 84, via Kilcoole to Newcastle village. Thereafter, walk east down the Sea Road until you reach the main entrance on the right-hand side, near the coast.

### On foot

The whole of the 15-kilometre Murrugh wetlands coastline has a pathway of variable quality, running parallel to the shore and the railway line. Walkers must at all times keep to the seaward side of the railway line. At Six Mile and Five Mile Points there are designated crossing points which allow access to the reserve. At all times beware of trains and keep well clear of the line!

### Entry

Visitors are asked to respect the habitats and wildlife of the reserve by keeping to the designated pathways and hides at all times. These make it possible to visit and view the whole area with ease. Please do not make undue noise, and to reduce any potential disturbance, no dogs, except guide dogs, are allowed.

**We hope you enjoy your visit!**

## Don't miss.....

**Wigeon** 'whistling' amongst the throngs of wintering duck on the shallow flooded fields throughout the winter



**Hen Harriers** quartering back and forth on a winter's day



**Dawn and Dusk Choruses** with bird song filling the air in spring and summer



**Grasshopper Warbler** reeling or **Snipe** drumming on a summer's evening



**Kingfisher** waiting patiently on its perch along the streams and wet ditches



**Lizards** basking on the sun-warmed boardwalks



**Butterflies** flying back and forth along the woodland glades



**Otters** busily searching for eels in the marshes



**Emperor Dragonflies** patrolling the watercourses and ponds



**Swallows** migrating south in their hundreds, heralding the start of autumn