

Estuary wading bird spectacle

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Hundreds of thousands of wading birds are drawn to our nutritious estuaries every winter

Some of the most thrilling and awe-inspiring natural events in winter are the flocks of waders that swirl around our estuaries.

These vast areas of glittering mud, sand and saltmarsh provide a feeding station for millions of wading birds seeking refuge from their northern breeding grounds in the comparative warmth of Europe's Atlantic fringe.



It's not just the climate that they're here for; estuarine mud is crammed with nutritious food from tiny crustaceans to worms and tiny molluscs. Waders exploit these in different ways.

The curlew's massive curved bill can reach depths where cockles and large worms live. Oystercatchers probe less deeply, but can still penetrate the mud for molluscs and crustaceans such as small crabs.

Redshanks are all-purpose waders with medium-length bills, while knot and dunlin feed on creatures closer to the surface, such as the tiny hydrobia snails. Grey plovers have short bills and rely on their large eyes to spot creatures crawling on the mud and use a peck-and-stop technique to catch their dinner.

But even the longest bills can't reach prey when the tide covers the mudflats and so waders are forced to retire to the shoreline to roost, often in vast flocks.

As they fly over the roosts, they perform stunning acrobatic displays, twisting and turning in unison like clouds of living smoke.

Knots are particularly impressive because they occur in such large numbers. In the air, tens of thousands of birds move as if they were a single entity. Smaller displays are provided by dunlins, redshanks and grey plovers, often accompanied by the shrill piping of oystercatchers.

Sometimes a peregrine will appear scything through the flocks as it tries to single out a victim. This is the benefit of communal flying and roosting for the waders: safety in numbers, thousands of watchful eyes and dazzling displays to confuse predators.

Where to see the wader spectacle

The bigger estuaries with the largest areas of mud support the biggest wader flocks, but some of the smaller estuaries are well worth visiting for sheer variety of birds. Always check tide times before you visit and take warm clothes. Here are a few great examples to start you off, with the best times being between October and late March.

The Humber Estuary, East Yorkshire / Lincolnshire: An excellent place for many waders and wildfowl, including Brent geese and grey plovers. Good viewing points on the north side at Spurn Head and Paull; try Read's Island, west of South Ferriby on the south side.

The Wash, Norfolk / Lincolnshire: A vast estuary on the east coast with some of the finest wader

spectacles in the British Isles. Oystercatchers, knot and dunlin are commonest, but there is a wide range of waders. Watch from the southern side at Snettisham in Norfolk or from the northern side at RSPB Freiston Shore near Boston, Lincolnshire.

Exe Estuary, Devon: Although wader flocks are relatively small, the Exe has great variety and is well worth a visit for its wintering flock of up to 500 avocets. There are boat trips from Exmouth and Topsham.

Morecambe Bay, Lancashire / Cumbria: An internationally important site for waders with around 200,000 individuals over vast areas of sand and mud. Viewing places include Jenny Brown's Point near Silverdale in the north and Pilling Lane Ends in the south. Pink-footed geese and wigeon are also common here.

Burry Inlet, Gower / South Glamorgan: An important site for knot, oystercatcher and other waders. View from Whiteford Point north of Llanmadoc village or from Dalton's Point near Pen-clawdd.

Solway Firth, Dumfries and Galloway: Caerlaverock Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserve is a superb viewing point for flocks of curlew, bar-tailed godwits and plovers. Huge skeins of barnacle geese fly over at dawn and dusk to feed in nearby fields.

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