COUNTY: DEVON SITE NAME: OTTER ESTUARY

DISTRICT: EAST DEVON

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, (as amended).

Local Planning Authority: DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL, East Devon District Council

National Grid Reference: SY 073830 Area: 33.3 (ha.) 82.3 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 192 1:10,000: SY 08 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): – Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:
A new site. In East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In County Structure Plan Coastal Preservation Area. Part a Devon Trust for Nature Conservation Nature Reserve (leased).

Description and Reasons for Notification:
The Otter Estuary contains a wide range of saltmarsh communities which together with additional areas of tall herb and scrub, support high numbers of breeding and overwintering bird species. Otterton Point is an important location for vertebrate palaeontology.

Flowing due south, the lower 2km reach of the River Otter is bounded by sea embankment to the west and a cliff of sandstone rising to some 10m on its eastern side. Below White Bridge the divergence of the embankment from the direction of the river channel ??????? the estuary to broaden to a maximum width of 0.5km. Here, the deep, fine alluvium has enabled a well-developed pan and creek system to form. A shingle ridge running eastwards from the west shore virtually closes the estuary from the sea, the river entering the sea at Otterton Point through a 5m gap.

The saltmarsh flora is particularly well developed, with successions of Glassworts *Salicornia* spp. and Common Cord-grass *Spartina anglica* at the lower levels; Common Saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia maritima*, Sea-purslane *Halimione portulacoides* and Sea Arrowgrass *Triglochin maritima* occurring on the middle marsh with Annual Sea-blite *Suaeda maritima*, Sea Aster *Aster tripolium* and Thrift *Armeria maritima* becoming more abundant on the higher areas. Characteristic of the uppermost levels are Sea Rush *Juncus maritimus*, Spear-leaved Orache *Attriplex hastata* and Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*. Areas subject to only occasional flooding support stands of Common Reed *Phragmites australis* or Sea Club-rush *Scirpus maritimus*, both of which support high numbers of invertebrates. Additional habitat variety is found along the western side of the sea wall. Here the damp areas support a marsh vegetation which includes Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*, Common Fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica*, Purple-loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria*, Cross-wort *Cruciata laevipes* and Divided Sedge *Carex divisa*, as well as a small reedbed with areas of open water. Rock Sea-lavender *Limonium binervosum* is present on the cliff ledges towards the sea.

On the river terrace upstream of White Bridge, a dense growth of Willow *Salix* spp. scrub and tall herbs provides undisturbed cover for many breeding birds, particularly for summer visitors such as the Reed and Sedge Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and *A. schoenobaenus*. Also breeding on the site are

Serinus *Serinus serinus*, Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, all three species of Woodpecker, Little Owl *Athene noctua*, Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* and Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*. Overwintering species include Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*, Siskin *Carduelis spinus* and waterbirds such as Teal *Anas crecca*, Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* and Dunlin *Calidris alpina*.

There are several distinct communities of mud-dwelling invertebrates in the estuary. Characteristic species include the bivalve Peppery Furrow-shell *Scrobicularia plana*, the ragworm *Nereis diversicolor* and the crustacean *Corophium volutator*. This variety, together with adjacent habitats, provides food for a corresponding variety of bird species, some of which can be present in large numbers, principally Curlew *Numenius arquata* and Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. The area is an important additional feeding station for birds from the nearby Exe Estuary, especially during severe weather.

Otterton Point itself has yielded the best remains of the diagnostic tooth plates, as well as a lower jaw, of a fossil known as ‘the Devon rhynchosaur’. As the only fossils, these allow approximate mid-Triassic dating of the Otter Sandstone Formation. This is also the most southerly occurrence of *Rhynchosaurus*, and it is of interest as a feature of ancient geography. The lower jaw was collected recently, and there is potential for more finds and future research.