

**County:** Hampshire **Site Name:** Upper Hamble Estuary and Woods SSSI

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

**Local Planning Authority:** Hampshire County Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council

**National Grid Reference:** SU 510110

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:** 196

**1:10,000:** SU 51 SW, SU 41 SE

**Area:** 148.7 (ha) 367.4 (ac)

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):**—

**Date of Last Revision:** —

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1 October 1987

**Date of Last Revision:** —

**Confirmed:** 29 June 1988

**Other Information:**

Includes part of the Upper Hamble Country Park and Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalists' Trust Nature Reserve at Curbridge, and land owned by the National Trust.

**Reasons for Notification:**

Upper Hamble Estuary and Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest comprises the uppermost section of the estuary of the River Hamble and its flanking zones of saltmarsh, reedswamp and ancient semi-natural woodland. The estuary penetrates the Tertiary strata of the Hampshire Basin and within the SSSI, London Clay, valley gravels, Bagshot Sands and Bracklesham Beds are successively exposed, proceeding up-river, each of which supports woodlands of differing types.

Twelve types of ancient broad-leaved woodland occur in the SSSI and collectively comprise one of the most ecologically diverse woodland areas in central southern England. Clearly defined sequences of woodland types occur, in response to changes in soil conditions. Of particular interest is the transition between zones of pedunculate oak/birch/hazel through sessile oak/birch/hazel to sessile oak/birch in response to changes from heavy London Clay soils to light, well-drained valley sands and gravels. The Hamble woodlands are notable for their stands of small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata*, a species which has declined throughout Britain in the past 5,000 years and which is now rarely fertile in Britain. In Catland Copse there is a transition from acid ash/lime/birch on the clays to the more freely-drained soils where the ash is replaced by sessile oak. The rare wild service tree *Sorbus torminalis* is frequent in many of the copses. The uncommon wet ash/wych elm stand type is found along Curbridge Creek whilst a rare and distinctive estuarine form of alderwood occurs on alluvium kept wet by freshwater springs at low tide and inundated by brackish water at high tide.

The diversity of woodland types has given rise to an exceptionally species-rich ground flora. 186 species have been recorded in Catland, Dock, Fosters, Hoe Moor, Vantage and Bottom Copses. They support at least 62 species indicative of a long continuity of woodland cover making this woodland complex one of the richest sites for ancient woodland vascular plants in Hampshire.

The variety of species and structure provides ideal conditions for a rich invertebrate fauna including the purple emperor *Apatura iris* and the rare leaf beetle *Orsodacne lineola*.

A few small areas of unimproved neutral grassland occur along the river. Red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* and *Agrostis* species dominate the swards. The rich flora includes dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum* and other species indicative of long established permanent pastures. The rare corky-fruited water dropwort *Oenanthe pimpinelloides* occurs.

The gradation from ancient semi-natural woodland to estuarine saltmarsh is a nationally rare feature. On the Hamble the upper saltmarsh is dominated by sea couch-grass *Elymus pycnanthus*. This grades into a mixed saltmarsh community containing common salt-marsh grass *Puccinellia maritima*, sea club-rush *Scirpus maritimus*, saltmarsh *Juncus gerardii*, thrift *Armeria maritima*, sea arrow-grass *Triglochin maritima*, sea purslane *Halimione portulacoides* and common cord-grass *Spartina anglica*. The saltmarsh supports the rare marshland beetle *Mecinus collaris* and the moth *Bactra robustana*.

Swamp and fen vegetation includes stands of reed sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima*, reedmace *Typha latifolia*, grey club-rush *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani* and common reed *Phragmites australis*. The reedbeds support breeding populations of reed and sedge warblers whilst great-crested grebes frequent the reed-invaded sheltered bays.

At low water there is a narrow zone of mudflats, more or less concave in profile, between the terminal cliffs of the saltmarsh and the river channel. The muds are rich in fine particulate matter and organic detritus and in common with similar muds elsewhere in south-east England, support large populations of marine worms, crustaceans and molluscs. Hence they provide a feeding ground for several species of shorebirds including a variety of waders, ducks and the grey heron.