

Northampton Washlands: Frequently Asked Questions

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If you have any other questions please contact the River Nene Regional Park

RNRP@northamptonshire.gov.uk

Tel 01604 367648

Site Significance

1. Why is the site important for wildlife?

Each winter the gravel pits and surrounding habitats between Thrapston and Northampton support large numbers of wintering water birds such as waders, swans and ducks.

These birds breed in northern Europe and the Arctic and come to the Nene Valley in the winter to avoid cold weather on their breeding grounds. In the winter over 20,000 water birds can be found in Nene Valley in Northamptonshire

Northampton Washlands are one of the most important sites for water birds in the Nene Valley and each winter over 3,000 Golden Plover rest there during the day before flying out to feed on the surrounding fields and up to 1000 Wigeon feed on the grassland within the flood storage basin.

2. Why are over wintering birds of such high conservation importance?

Some species of birds, including waders, swans and ducks are recognised at international scale of being at risk and are protected through the creation of Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

The importance of the Nene Valley for water-birds has been recognised and part of the Valley has been designated as the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits Special Protection Area; this means the valley is of European importance and receives the same level of protection as other important bird areas such as The Wash, Camargue and the Danube.

It vitally important that people work together to ensure that the birds using the Northampton Washlands and wider Nene Valley are safeguarded and harmful impacts are minimised.

3. What are the issues and long term effects if the disturbance continues?

The Northampton Washlands are a popular place for walking and dog walking but this is causing disturbance to Golden Plover and other birds using the site.

Golden Plover are very sensitive to disturbance and will fly off if people or dogs get too close to them. Constant disturbance can affect the long term survival of these birds because they do not have time to rest and waste energy flying away.

The number of walkers and levels of disturbance on the site have been increasing and are starting to affect the birds using the site and numbers of Golden Plovers here are falling. This problem will continue unless the impact of disturbance can be minimised.

Detailed survey work carried out in 2009/10 showed that the greatest levels of disturbance happen when people go down the banks into the basin area or allow their dogs to run around in the basin.

4. How can I help?

The survey work shows that if you keep to the top embankment and prevent your dog from accessing the basin then you reduce the levels of disturbance significantly.

When you visit Northampton Washlands you can help minimise disturbance by keeping to the embankment at all times and if you have a dog, to keep that on the embankment as well.

You are requested not to access the basin of the Washlands.

You can also help by spreading the message of the importance of the site and encouraging other users to also keep to the embankment

5. Why weren't the disturbance issues raised when the site was originally proposed as being of international importance for over-wintering birds?

Disturbance levels at this site have been of concern for a number of years. Detailed evidence from the 2009/10 survey has confirmed that chronic disturbance is a key issue and that work was required to resolve the issues.

A key action has been the production by RNRP of an Access Management Plan for Northampton Washlands which aims to enable the area to continue to be used for recreational activities without impacting on the birds.

Legal Enforcement and Legislation

6. What are the legal implications if I carry on using the site for recreational activity?

We are hoping that by raising awareness of the issues affecting the important bird populations using the site that people using Northampton Washlands will understand the importance of staying on the embankment voluntarily.

However, as a last resort, for people who persistently continue to behave in such a way that disturbs the birds using the Northampton Washlands then legal proceedings may be considered by Natural England.

Section 28P (6) of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) makes it an offence for a person to intentionally or recklessly disturb those species for which the site is important; this includes golden plover

In 2009 a successful prosecution was brought by Natural England against an individual for recklessly causing disturbance to birds by releasing their dogs on a nature reserve in Cornwall. (The person was fined £250 with £250 costs)

If, after a trial period, the voluntary approach is not working and levels of disturbance remain the same then it may be necessary to apply for a Dog Control Order to require dogs to be kept on a lead.

7. Is there a warden or ranger responsible for the Northampton Washlands, or the whole of the SPA, and if not then will this happen?

At present there is no permanent ranger or warden for the Clifford Hill Gravel Pit.

Awareness-raising will be carried out during key periods by RNRP and partner organisations and there is a desire to encourage Community Input on this site.

8. What powers does the local team have to enforce the legislation?

None of the staff or volunteers from RNRP you may meet on site have any powers to enforce legislations.

However incidents of disturbance may be recorded and submitted to Natural England as the responsible regulatory body.

Recreational Activities and Impacts

9. The Northampton Washlands have Public Rights of Way so it must be OKAY to use it for recreational activity?

Public Rights of Way (PROW) are located on part of the embankment and there is a permissive path around the remainder of the embankment.

There is no formal or permissive access within the basin.

10. There are other activities that disturb the birds, including shooting and fishing – so is this going to stop?

The current levels of shooting and fishing have been agreed with Natural England and are not causing a long term impact on the SPA and will continue.

Fishing is only carried out within the basin during the summer so as not to impact at the most sensitive times.

The shooting has been undertaken at a very low level for many years and past survey work and the recent 2009/10 survey confirm that whilst the actions have a short term impact it does not have a long term impact both in terms of disturbance and impact on bird numbers.

The 2009/10 surveys showed that birds returned within 24 hours of a shoot.

The levels of shooting are carefully controlled so that shooting only occurs weekly and do not occur during periods of cold weather.

Providing it is carried out at a low level and is carefully controlled wildfowling can be carried out without impacting on birds using the site and takes place on a number of important bird sites such as the Wash, North Norfolk Coast, without harming the populations.

11. I have been using this site for years, and the birds have always been there, so I can't be making that much difference?

The variety of birds using the site has altered over the last few years and numbers of Golden Plover, which are most affected by disturbance have declined. The level of disturbance is a key factor in this and also in the reduced breeding success of other species.

12. I only use the site occasionally, so I can't be making that much difference?

The problem is that there are lots of people who “only use the site occasionally” and their small impacts combine to create a major impact and cumulatively do make a difference.

Every person who visits the Washlands, whether it's every day or occasionally potentially has an impact but can also play their part in safeguarding the Northampton Washlands as an important bird site.

13. Can I use the basin in summer when the over wintering birds aren't present?

No. Although the SPA is of international importance for over-wintering birds, the designation is continuous and not just seasonal therefore it is important that the Washlands are safeguarded at all times.

Restricting unauthorised access to the basin at all times of the year reduces the confusion that a seasonal restriction brings and gives a clear message to all visitors to the site and how to enjoy the site without causing disturbance. Many birds nest on the ground and the eggs and chicks are particularly vulnerable to damage or predation once parents leave.

Remember that there are no public rights of way or permissive access in the basin.

14. Is the awareness raising aimed at just dog owners or all recreational users?

This work is part of a larger programme of awareness-raising both on Northampton Washlands and the wider Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SPA including publicity, guided walks and interpretation panels.

15. What about the sheep?

The sheep vital to the management of the Washland and their grazing creates the short grass that makes ideal habitat for golden plover and wigeon.

Miscellaneous

16. Is there an alternative site nearby that I can use for similar recreational activity?

There is adjacent land to the west of the site and the land on the north side of the River Nene, both of which have permissive access.

17. Will there be the possibility for public and community input into managing the site and its integrity? (such as a “friends of” group)?

As the awareness campaign at Clifford Hill progresses, along with publicity for the overall Upper Nene Gravel Pits SPA, it is hoped that the local and wider community will become more directly involved with safeguarding the importance of Northampton Washlands. This has proved to be highly successful at other locations in the Upper Nene Gravel Pits i.e. Summer Leys and Stanwick Lakes.

18. Why haven't I seen anything about the importance of the Northampton Washlands, and the disturbance issues in the local press?

The aim is to ensure that current users are informed first as part of the management plan for Clifford Hill. The most effective way of achieving this is to liaise directly with the public “on site”. More information in the local press will appear subsequently for the overall SPA.

19. Doesn't the disturbance issue exist at other lakes in the Nene Valley – so are there other awareness raising initiatives at these locations?

Disturbance issues to exist at other lakes within the Nene Valley and many of these already have measures in place to minimise the impact of the disturbance. Where Natural England is working with landowners and other key partners to ensure the impact of this disturbance is minimised and Access / Recreation Management Plans will eventually be developed for the whole of the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits SPA.

Northampton Washlands has been prioritised for action because it is under pressure from chronic recreational disturbance due to a combination of the proximity of Northampton and the number of people using the site; the large number birds using the site and the fact they use the grassland habitat and come into more contact with people than birds using the lakes.

20. Who currently owns and manages the Northampton Washlands and Clifford Hill Gravel Pits?

The site is privately owned and tenanted to a local farmer who grazes the site with sheep. The banking forms part of Northampton's flood defence and is managed by the Environment Agency.