

A guide to the birds of the
Northumberland Coast



wild & wonderful



Welcome to the Northumberland Coast – A beguiling place of shifting sands and rising tides, calling birds and basking seals.

Stretching out across the eastern edge of Britain, where land and water meet, this extraordinary place comprises over 40 miles of species-rich dunes, saltmarsh, rocky shore, freshwater, sandy beaches and mudflats. Time has a slower pace here. The way of life is dictated by the seasons, the dynamic weather and the ebb and flow of wind and tides.

This coastline has been formally protected since the 1950s as a wild natural place but has been valued for centuries. The wind here whispers of ancient races: the thunder of Viking boats, the chants of monks and the footsteps of pilgrims. Listen hard and you may hear them.

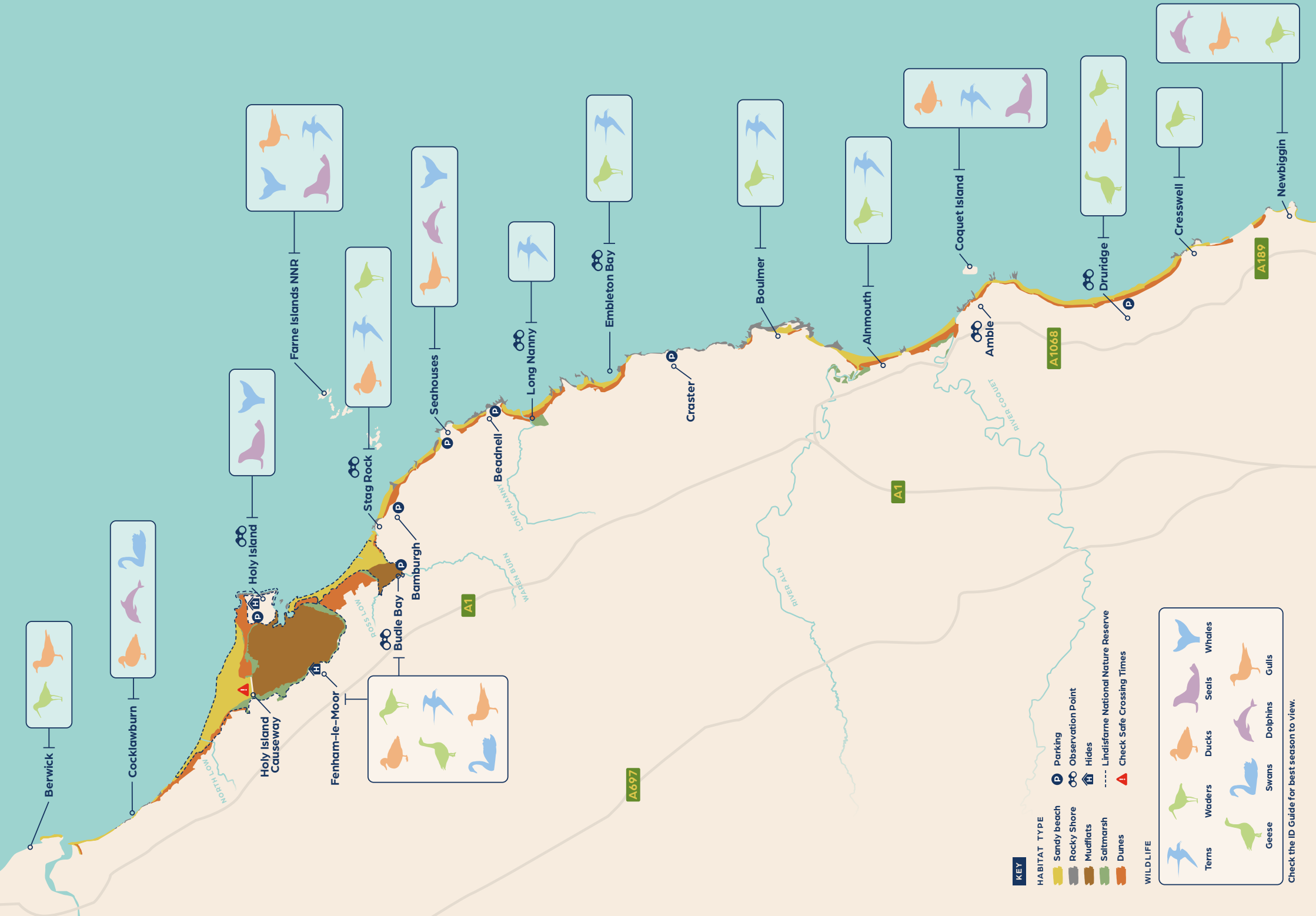
Birds have found sustenance and made their home on these enchanted shores for millennia. Every year tens of thousands travel amazing distances to feed, roost, breed, and find refuge on the food-rich shores and coastal waters alongside resting seals.

Sadly, their lives and habitats are now in increasing peril and without closer stewardship this special place will be gone forever. Shorebird numbers have suffered massive declines in the last 30 years due to increased coastal recreation and climate change. Northumberland has lost almost 60% of its breeding Ringed Plovers, while in the whole of the UK only 1,400 pairs of Little Terns now breed. However, thanks to increased conservation efforts, Little Tern numbers have increased on the Northumberland coast with over 10% of the UK population now breeding within Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve and the Long Nanny site.

By continuing to work together we can reverse negative trends.

We welcome you to enjoy the Northumberland Coast – but please remember that the wildlife can only survive if given space and shown respect. Together we can ensure this mythical land remains for millennia more.





eye spy

Birds come in all shapes and sizes. Waders have long bills for probing in mud to collect invertebrates; terns are well designed to fly long distances to enable them to complete epic migrations and skylarks hover in the air calling away. Use your field craft skills to spot them displaying natural behaviours. You'll be amazed at what you see!



Look high and low

You may see birds flying or scuttling across the shore.



Listen

The calls you hear from the birds each have a purpose. Are sounds regular and relaxed, or do they seem loud and alarming – this is a bird on red alert!

Zoom in!

Use your binoculars to see beautiful variations in plumage. Is the bird running away? You may be too close – step back and watch their natural behaviour.

Nothing to see?

Don't be disappointed if you don't spot a bird straight away. There are plenty of other tell-tale signs that they are here. Can you spot empty shells where they've been feeding? Footprints in the sand?



Habitat Types



Sandy Beach

Northumberland is renowned for its long stretches of golden sandy shores. Beneath the wet sand are juicy worms; higher up the beach sandhoppers and other insects live amongst the washed up seaweed. All provide a tasty meal for shorebirds.



Muddy Shores

Muddy shores are bursting with worms and other marine creatures, the soft sediment means it is easy for birds to probe for food. Most of the land on the Northumberland Coast which lies below the high tide mark is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), this is to protect the shorebirds and their habitats.



Dunes

Sand dunes are commonly associated with most beaches in Northumberland. They are dynamic, which means they are constantly shifting and changing shape. They are home to a wide variety of plants, including orchids, which attract a range of insect species such as bumblebees, butterflies and moths.



Rocky Shore

The rocky shore is an extremely important habitat for shorebirds, seabirds, seals and marine life. Rockpools, boulders, seaweed and crevices, nooks and crannies offer a huge diversity of different food sources, shelter and safe haven.



Saltmarsh

Saltmarsh is a vegetated area between land and the open sea, it regularly gets covered by high tides and consists of salt tolerant plants binding the sediment. These sediments provide food for invertebrates and birds that rest and shelter within the vegetation.



ID guide

KEY

UK Conservation Status

- H** High concern
- M** Medium concern
- L** Low concern

When to spot

-  Spring
-  Autumn
-  Summer
-  Winter

Sex of bird pictured

-  Male
-  Female

Where not shown, sexes difficult to tell apart in the field

Terns



M



Little Tern

Identifying features

Smallest of the tern species. Black cap with white patch on their forehead at the base of their bright yellow bill.

Where to spot

Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve and Long Nanny shorebird site.



H



Arctic Tern

Identifying features

Black cap and red bill and legs with long forked tail.

Where to spot

Long Nanny Tern site, Farne Islands National Nature Reserve and Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve. Northumberland is the southern limit of its breeding range, with Beadnell Bay being one of the UK's largest mainland breeding sites for these seabirds.



H



Roseate Tern

Identifying features

A dazzling white tern with a pinkish hue to the breast and long tail streamers.

Where to spot

Spend summers breeding on Coquet Island, off the Northumberland Coast. Roost at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve post-breeding.



M



Common Tern

Identifying features

Black cap and orange-red bill with black tip and long orange-red legs.

Where to spot

Farne Islands National Nature Reserve and Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



M



Sandwich Tern

Identifying features

The largest UK tern species, black shaggy cap and long black bill with a yellow tip, has a distinctive Ker-rick call.

Where to spot

Farne Islands National Nature Reserve and the food-rich waters around the Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Waders



M



Sanderling

Identifying features

Bright white plumage in winter and rapid feeding action at the shoreline.

Where to spot

Running back and forth at the water's edge on sandy beaches.



H



Ringed Plover

Identifying features

Black 'ring' around the neck and across the eyes, bright orange bill and legs.

Where to spot

Birds gather in greater numbers outside of the breeding season, but a small population breeds on sandy and shingle beaches, with the largest breeding population at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



M



Oystercatcher

Identifying features

Black and white plumage with distinctive long orange-red bill and legs.

Where to spot

Most areas of rocky shore and adjacent farmland. Intertidal areas along the coast and adjacent farmland.



H



Dunlin

Identifying features

Small wading bird with slightly down-curved bill and black belly in the summer.

Where to spot

Intertidal mudflats and sandy beaches, with the largest flocks found at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



H



Purple Sandpiper

Identifying features

Orange-yellow legs and bill base.

Where to spot

Feeding on the edge of the rocky shore – they are true rocky shore experts! Stag Rocks to the north of Bamburgh Beach is a stronghold.



M



Turnstone

Identifying features

Mottled brown, chestnut and black with orange legs.

Where to spot

Most areas of rocky shore and beaches using their short thick bill to rummage through seaweed and move pebbles to look for small crustaceans and insects.



H



Curlew

Identifying features

Long downward curved bill and distinctive, haunting call.

Where to spot

Edges of salt marshes and mudflats.



M



Redshank

Identifying features

Medium long bill, bright orange-red legs and speckled body.

Where to spot

Intertidal sand and mudflats.



M



Bar-tailed Godwit

Identifying features

Up-curved long bill, long legs. Grey in winter, chestnut in summer.

Where to spot

Internationally important numbers at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



M



Grey Plover

Identifying features

Short black bill and dark legs. Silvery and black in summer with black underwings.

Where to spot

Feed on mudflats and roost along the coast especially at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



L



Golden Plover

Identifying features

Medium sized, golden in colour with short black bill.

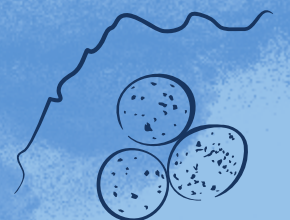
Where to spot

Coastal grasslands at Craster and Newton Point, intertidal mudflats and farmland. Largest numbers at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Did you know...

Ringed Plovers will pretend to have a broken wing to lure predators away from the nest.





Did you know...

A group of **Teal** is known as a 'spring' because they take off almost vertically when startled.

Ducks



Long-tailed Duck ♂

Identifying features

Small black and white duck. Males have a long tail, females are browner than the males.

Where to spot

Sheltered bays along the coast.



Wigeon ♂

Identifying features

Medium sized duck, round head with small bill, males have chestnut head/neck with a creamy yellow forehead, pink breast and grey body.

Where to spot

Feeding along the shores, Fenham flats and Budle Bay viewing platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Shelduck

Identifying features

Dark green head and neck with chestnut belly and a red bill.

Where to spot

Along the coast with large numbers at Budle Bay viewing platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Shoveler ♂

Identifying features

Large spatulate bill, males have dark green head.

Where to spot

Coastal and water bodies, Budle Bay viewing platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Swans



Mute Swan

Identifying features

Large white swan with orange and black bill.

Where to spot

Coastal, breed on small waterbodies.



Eider Duck ♀

Identifying features

Large sea duck with striking black and white plumage of male birds, while females are mottled brown.

Where to spot

Most shelter in offshore bays along the coast. Can be seen on their breeding grounds of the Farne Islands National Nature Reserve and Coquet Island in summer.



Teal ♀

Identifying features

Small duck. Males have chestnut-coloured heads with green eye-patches, females are brown. Both show green wing patches in flight.

Where to spot

Close inshore with good views at Budle Bay Viewing Platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Red-Breasted Merganser ♀

Identifying features

Brown head with shaggy crest and long orange/red bill.

Where to spot

Sheltered bays along the coast, with large numbers at Budle Bay viewing platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Common Scoter ♀

Identifying features

Dark Sea duck, females are lighter with a pale face and males are totally black.

Where to spot

Along the Northumberland Coast with the largest congregation at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Whooper Swan

Identifying features

White swan with yellow bill.

Where to spot

Coastal and adjacent farmland.



Geese



Light-bellied Brent Goose

Identifying features

Small, black head and neck with a white neck stripe.

Where to spot

50% of worlds East-Atlantic population can be found at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Barnacle Goose

Identifying features

Distinctive contrasting black head, neck and breast, white face and belly.

Where to spot

Internationally important numbers at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, especially Budle Bay viewing platform.



Seals



Harbour Seal

Identifying features

Short muzzle with diagonal nostrils to form a V and more uniform spots than the Grey Seal, slightly smaller.

Where to spot

Often seen at the bridge on the causeway at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Gulls



Herring Gull

Identifying features

Pale grey backs and wings, pale legs and yellow bill.

Where to spot

Widespread along the coast with large roosts at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Lesser Black-backed Gull

Identifying features

Dark grey back and wings with yellow legs and yellow bill.

Where to spot

Widespread along the coast with large roosts at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Pink-footed Goose

Identifying features

Grey with pink bill and feet.

Where to spot

Budle Bay viewing platform at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, roost on beaches and feed on adjacent farmland.



Greylag Goose

Identifying features

Light grey with a bulky orange bill and legs.

Where to spot

Roosting along the coast and feeding on adjacent farmland.



Grey Seals

Identifying features

Long, flat, dog-like muzzle with parallel nostrils - bulkier than the Harbour Seal.

Where to spot

Sand flats, mud flats, rocky shores. Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve supports the largest mainland site in the region and the Farne Islands National Nature Reserve the largest regional breeding colony.



Black-headed Gull

Identifying features

Small sized gull with chocolate-brown head in summer plumage, white in winter plumage. Red legs and bill.

Where to spot

Breed on the Farne Island National Nature Reserve, feed along the coastal waters.



Great Black-backed Gull

Identifying features

Large gull with powerful, thick yellow bill. Dark black back and wings with pale legs.

Where to spot

Widespread along the coast with large roosts at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.



Did you know...

Barnacle Geese nest on cliffs in the Arctic. The goslings must leap from the cliffs to find their parents hundreds of metres below—whilst dodging Arctic Foxes!



Migration: visitors to the shores of Northumberland

Birds travel immense distances to come to the shores of the Northumberland Coast.

Summer visitors, such as terns, travel from the south to breed along the shores of Northumberland. They feed on the small shoaling fish in spring and summer. Adults and fledglings rest and feed before making the mammoth journey south again, to be repeated the following year. In late summer the wintering visitors, such as Light-bellied Brent Geese, start to arrive having bred further north. They come here to escape the harsh winters of the Arctic, to feed on energy-rich eelgrass.

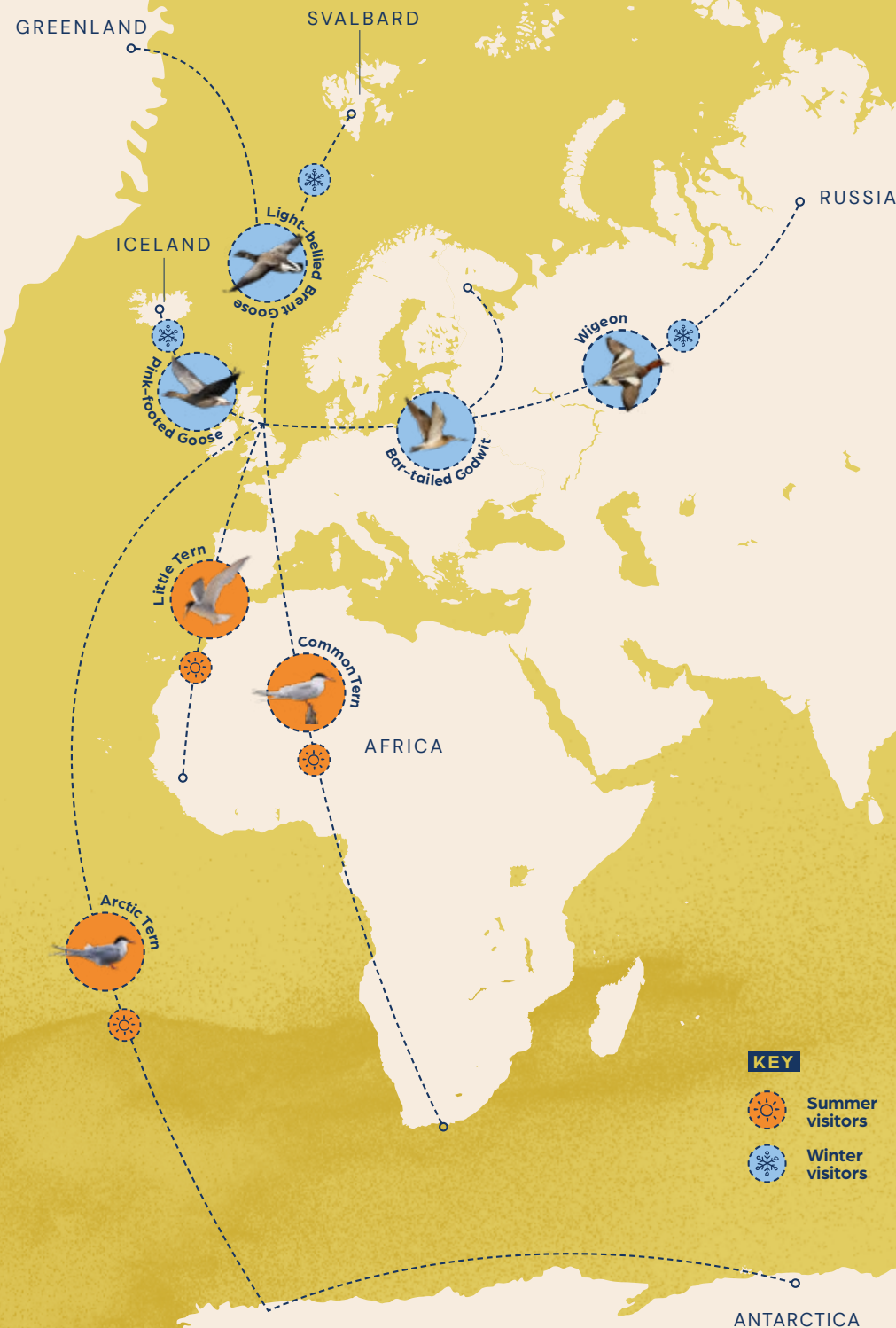
Did you know...



In 2022 a **Bar-tailed Godwit** broke the record for the **longest non-stop flight** of any known bird, with an individual flying **13,560km in just 11 days** from Alaska to Australia!



The oldest **Little Tern** was found to be **26 years old**. This bird will have travelled at least **200,000 miles** in its lifetime. These birds weigh the same as a tennis ball – amazing!



A year on the coast

Spring

Birds from across the world arrive to feed, roost, and breed on sand and rock. Many of these birds are critically endangered. They find sanctuary here after flying thousands of miles.

Birds that spent winter here return to northerly climes to breed.

Dunelands become awash with colour. The flowers are a vital source of food for invertebrates. Staff and volunteers install fencing, boundary ropes and netting to create shorebird protection areas.

Seals also find sanctuary within these refuges, hauling out onto the mud and sandflats.

Look out for...

Terns diving to catch fish in the shallows.



Summer

The coastline is a hive of activity as shorebirds embark on a feeding frenzy. Young birds gather on the beach to build strength and hone their flying skills.

Shorebird protection areas continue to give refuge to breeding and roosting birds. Come along and chat with staff and volunteers.

Late summer is a crucial time for summer birds to rest and feed before commencing their long migration to southern climes.

Grey and Harbour Seals can be seen across Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve with thousands of Grey Seals resting on the mud and sand flats. Harbour Seals give birth to their young in June and July.

Listen to...

The chatty call of nesting **Kittiwakes** on the cliffs below Dunstanburgh Castle.



Autumn

Seals breed on mass on the Farne Islands National Nature Reserve, with increasing numbers at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve.

Thousands of birds arrive on the Northumberland Coast to escape the harsh winters of the Arctic. Up to fifty percent of the world's population of Light-bellied Brent Geese come from the Arctic Circle to spend the winter here.

The highest numbers of birds can be found at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve feeding, resting and regaining their strength, with up to 60,000 birds being recorded. Here, they find a feast of energy-rich invertebrates in the eelgrass and mudflats (some of the largest in the country).

Look out for...

Pups of Grey Seals. October is the best time to spot them.



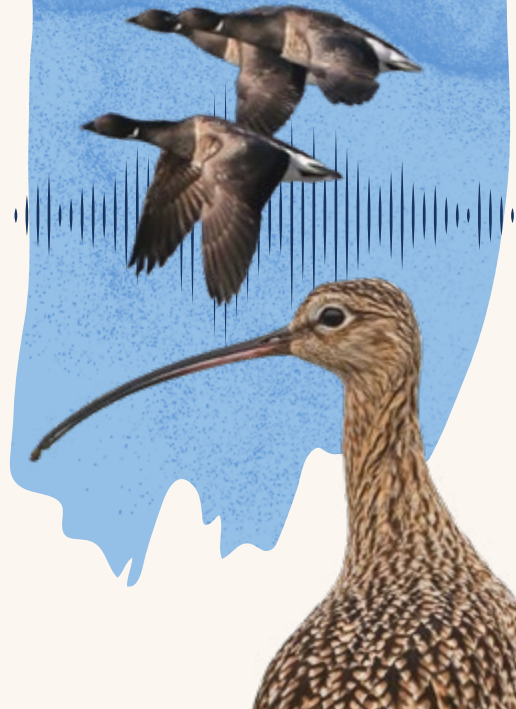
Winter

In severe weather the birds use a large amount of energy just to keep warm. Birds frantically feed to survive the chill, at the mercy of tides and freezing conditions.

At dawn, thousands of geese will leave their roost to head out to feed - a natural wonder of sound and vision.

Listen to...

The eerie call of the **Curlew** and the cacophony of **geese**.



The guardians of the shore

Much of the Northumberland Coast is cared for by a range of organisations who work together all year round, conserving the precious habitats and species to maintain a balance between wildlife and recreation. You may see some of these friendly teams out and about during your visit, they are easy to spot and will be delighted to tell you all about the Northumberland Coast and its wildlife wonders.



LIFE WADER

The LIFE WADER (Water and Disturbance Environmental Restoration on the Northumberland Coast) project aims to reverse the decline of river, coastal, and marine habitats and wildlife across 70,242 hectares of the Northumberland Coast and the cross-border River Tweed catchment. WADER is led by Natural England in partnership with the Environment Agency, Newcastle University and Tweed Forum, it is co-funded by the European Union.

www.lifewader.co.uk



Natural England

Natural England is the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, helping to protect England's nature and landscapes for people to enjoy and for their intrinsic value. Natural England manages Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, a 3,500 hectare reserve on the Northumberland Coast, founded in 1964 to help safeguard the internationally important species and habitats and encourage responsible recreation.

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england

www.lifewader.co.uk/lindisfarne-national-nature-reserve



Northumberland
Coast
National
Landscape

Northumberland Coast National Landscape

In 1958 this area was designated an outstanding landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so precious that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard it.

www.northumberlandcoast-nl.org.uk



National Trust

The National Trust is Europe's largest conservation charity founded in 1895 to protect the nation's heritage and open spaces for everyone to enjoy. The National Trust cares for over 11 miles of unspoilt coastline in Northumberland, including the Long Nanny shorebird site at Beadnell, as well as the Farne Islands National Nature Reserve.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/north-east



Berwickshire & Northumberland
Marine Nature Partnership

Berwickshire and Northumberland Marine Nature Partnership

The Berwickshire and Northumberland Marine Nature Partnership is the Coastal and Estuarine Partnership working to conserve and promote the sustainable use of the sea and estuaries from Fast Castle Head in Scotland down to the River Tyne in England.

www.xbordercurrents.co.uk



Space for Shorebirds

Northumberland County Council's coastal wildlife ranger team is funded by housebuilder and tourism developer contributions through the planning system. The team carries out year-round engagement to address recreational disturbance to Northumberland's nationally and internationally important bird populations.

www.spaceforshorebirds.co.uk

And finally... you!

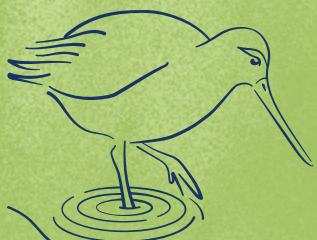
Read on to find out how you can play your part in looking after this wonderful place...

Living in harmony together

We welcome you to enjoy the Northumberland Coast. This is a spectacular place to discover, full of natural wonders, but the wildlife here can only survive if given space and shown respect. Your actions can help make this special place thrive.

Know where you are and what rules are in place – these can vary along different parts of the Northumberland Coast, and there are seasonal access restrictions. Please check local signage.

Friendly staff and volunteers can help with all your queries and will love to tell you more about the wildlife and landscape.



Go easy!

Give all wildlife space to feed and rest (we suggest at least 100m). The birds here have travelled incredible distances and are exhausted. If they fly off, then you are already too close. A bird in flight can't feed at all!

In spring and summer any disturbance can result in birds abandoning eggs or chicks and disrupt feeding and resting activity; in winter it can cause death.



Note signs of distress

When birds or seals raise their heads or make a distress call it's a sign of alarm. If this happens move away and view from a distance.

Scan to hear distress calls



Ringed plover



Oystercatcher



Follow all signage

Give fenced areas a wide berth. This may mean no dogs or people are allowed. (These can change year by year, depending on where the birds choose to nest). Remember birds also nest, feed and roost outside these areas.



Keep to paths

How would you feel if someone crushed your home? Avoid trampling on delicate flowers and nesting birds.



Take the Lead!

We know dogs love to play, but birds and seals see dogs as predators and have a strong flight reaction as they would to a fox or wolf. Please observe signs and put your dog on a lead before you reach the site. Within the Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, and at the Long Nanny shorebird site, dogs must be kept on a short lead or at heel at all times. Never let dogs chase birds or seals – this may seem harmless and playful but could cause serious trauma or even death.



Don't go for the close-up shot!

You could use binoculars or a camera zoom and please avoid flash photography.



Seals bite!

Seals are easily disturbed, which can cause them injury or to abandon pups. Their bite can be very harmful to dogs and humans – keep at least 100m clear.



No camping

Camping and lighting fires are not permitted anywhere on Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve or on National Trust land. Any open flames may cause a fire.



No drones

Flying drones is prohibited on Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve and National Trust land.



Beware invasive plants

Beware invasive pirri-pirri bur – it is very spiky! Keep to the main paths. Check pet fur and clothes before you leave. Pirri-pirri burs spread easily, threatening the dune ecosystem. Don't take pirri-pirri bur to new places to grow.



No off-road driving

Driving vehicles off road is prohibited.



Leave no trace

Take your litter home and bin your dog waste. Take away only memories.





 @lifewader23

Follow LIFE WADER project on Instagram for further information, events and volunteering opportunities
www.lifewader.co.uk



Co-funded by the European Union



Recyclable and printed on FSC certified paper
© 2026 Natural England. All rights reserved