

At peak season, the Taw-Torridge estuary in North Devon is bustling with holidaymakers. Less obvious are the feathered visitors feeding on the mudflats and a perfect haven for these birds is Devon Wildlife Trust's newest reserve, Horsey Island, on the Braunton side of the estuary.

On the inland side, the reserve is bounded by a sea defence bank built in 1815 to reclaim what is now Braunton Marshes. An outer bank was built around 40 years later, enclosing 80 hectares of farmland and marsh.

This outer bank was breached in 2017, letting in the tides through a gradually widening gap. Since the breach, the area between the banks has transformed from freshwater marsh into saltmarsh and mudflats making it a great habitat for wading birds, ducks and egrets to feed and rest.

In 2019 the Trust was able to buy the site with the help of a generous donation from local birdwatcher, Mark Ansell.

Trust project officer, Gavin Bloomfield, has the ideal background in nature conservation and coastal change for the development of Horsey Island. While the breach is likely to be too expensive to repair, he believes that at some point it will stop widening naturally



Shelduck are easy to spot with their distinctive colouring



Buzzards can be seen hunting in autumn



Photos: Martin Batt

## A new haven

Local residents tell AMANDA TUKE why Devon Wildlife Trust's newest reserve is such a gift for the county

and is looking into options for managing the changes. As well as for wildlife, the developing saltmarsh is valuable as a carbon sink which the Trust hopes will attract green investment to the area.

Mary Breeds, local ecologist, is following vegetation changes. "Last summer, you'd have thought you were looking at grass, but it was actually dense marsh samphire," she tells me. Mary believes a build-up of organic matter and silt over time will enable salt-tolerant plants like colourful sea lavender and sea aster to colonise.

Birdwatcher and photographer Martin Batt, can see Horsey Island through his window and visits every few days. "I'm really pleased it's been made into a reserve because it didn't have much of a future", he explains. Martin enjoys photographing spectacular flocks of golden plover and lapwings visiting in autumn.

For the future, the Trust will need to balance affordability and minimising risk with what's good for wildlife and the experience of visitors. "Viewing platforms and

shelter are possibilities", Gavin tells me, "And we're keen to work with neighbouring landowners and the local community to look into how this amazing natural setting within the North Devon Biosphere can be best appreciated by locals and visitors alike." ♦

[devonwildlifetrust.org/nature-reserves/horsey-island](https://devonwildlifetrust.org/nature-reserves/horsey-island)  
[devonwildlifetrust.org/caen-wetlands](https://devonwildlifetrust.org/caen-wetlands)

**ABOVE:** Look out for little egrets feeding

### BIRDS TO LOOK OUT FOR

While you can't walk on the saltmarsh itself, visitors have a great view across Horsey Island reserve from the South West Coast path which follows the Inner Bank. Local birdwatcher Martin Batt says there's all year-round interest.

In summer, as well as wading birds on the mudflats, listen out for the skylarks.

In autumn, keep an eye out for peregrines, buzzards and kestrels hunting over the marshes.

In winter, it's hard to miss large flocks of wading birds like golden plover and lapwings feeding.

In spring, look out for long-legged little egrets and handsome shelduck feeding.