

Cocker Tidal Channel & Cockerham Marsh SSSI Restoration Investigation

Task 4 Cockerham Marsh SSSI: Summary

The Cocker Tidal Channel and Cockerham Marsh SSSI Restoration Investigation, led by Natural England, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and the Environment Agency, forms part of the wider Our Future Coast programme in North West England.

‘Task 4 – Cockerham Marsh SSSI’ focuses on understanding the ecological baseline, restoration potential, management needs and biodiversity value of Cockerham Marsh SSSI. Whilst once being part of the upper saltmarsh of Cockerham Sands, the site is now dominated by floral species such as rush, reed, grass and scrub since its enclosure by a flood embankment in 1981.

The SSSI’s sole notified feature is the natterjack toad, which is currently in ‘unfavourable–declining’ condition, with no confirmed breeding at the site since 1987. Historical records show repeated failures to sustain the population due to drying pools, salinity changes, competition from common amphibians and loss of suitable habitat. Past attempts - including pond excavation, rush removal and multiple spawn translocations (2002–2004) - were unsuccessful.



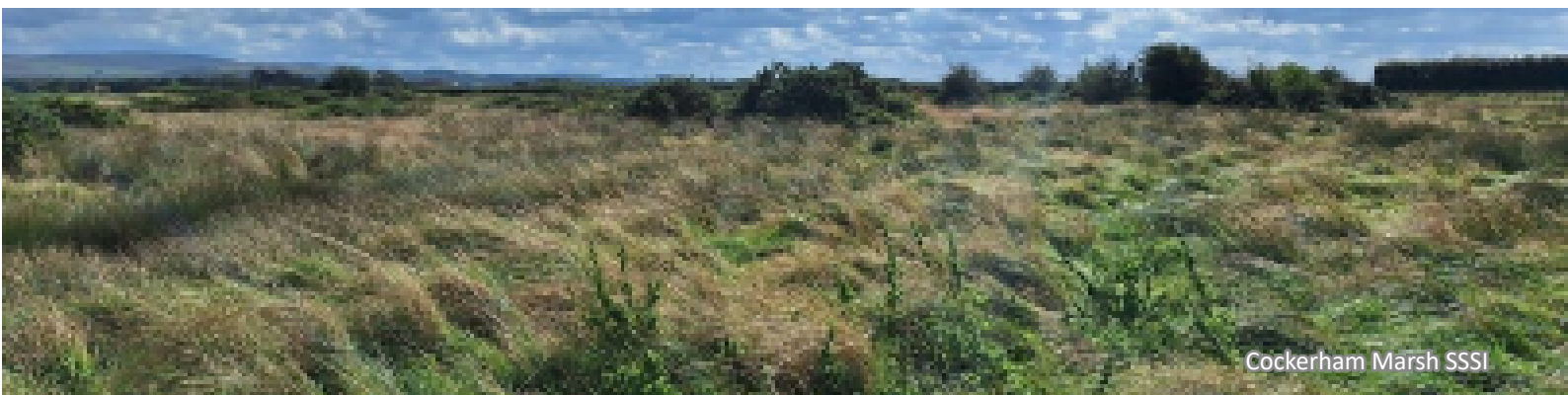
Cockerham Marsh SSSI

The study identifies three major long term pressures:

1. flood and coastal erosion risk management structures, particularly the 1981 flood embankment which cut off tidal influence;
2. scrub encroachment, dominated by gorse; and
3. undergrazing, resulting in extensive sea rush expansion.

These changes have progressively reduced the suitability of breeding pools and terrestrial habitat. Field surveys in 2025 confirmed that all historic natterjack ponds are now completely dry and overgrown, the grassland is unmanaged, and the site is dominated by neutral grassland, modified grassland, scrub and small wet ditches. No evidence of natterjack toads or other protected amphibians was found.

The survey also identified the presence or potential presence of important species including curlew, greylag geese, brown hare, roe deer, common frog, and occasional foraging bats. The adjacent coastal habitats form part of several nationally and internationally designated sites including Morecambe Bay SAC/SPA/Ramsar and Lune Estuary SSSI. These areas support large assemblages of wading and overwintering birds, with Cockerham Marsh providing some functionally linked land for these species.



Cockerham Marsh SSSI



Cockerham Marsh SSSI boundary

The report assesses restoration options at Cockerham Marsh SSSI, from embankment removal to regulated tidal exchange, saline treatments and pool creation. Although ecological restoration potential exists, the preferred option is **Do nothing**, due to high capital cost, large scale engineering requirements, flood risk implications for neighbouring land, need for long term maintenance and the lack of confidence that natterjack re establishment would succeed. Nevertheless, the study notes that tidal reinstatement remains theoretically feasible and may be reconsidered at a future date.



Gorse



Overgrown with grassland and scrub

If restoration were pursued later, significant management - scrub clearance, rush control, earthworks, grazing management and natterjack toad spawn or tadpole translocations - would be essential to create and maintain suitable breeding conditions.

The report provides an early stage Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) assessment of the SSSI's present-day status, providing a baseline against which any future changes can be compared.



Natterjack toad