

THE SKERN
NORTHAM BURROWS
Grid Reference: SS451306



Beach profile for Coastwise North Devon
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INTRODUCTION

The Skern is a north east facing horseshoe shaped bay situated on the northern side of Northam Burrows Country Park on the mouth of the River Torridge. Northam Burrows, lies within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and has been designated SSSI status. On the Skern's eastern side the coast turns to the north as it joins with the beach of West Appledore and the RNL station. It is a bay for birdwatching, walking or just enjoying the moment. From the Skern are extensive views of the Torridge and Taw estuaries, sand bars and Crow Point which do wonders for the spirit especially on a clear day.



Information board at entrance of the Skern.

The Skern is accessed by the northern Northam Burrows Toll Road (payment required during late spring to earlier autumn) which has a small car park at its northern end as well as parking along the side of the road. The town of Westward Ho! is clearly visible in the distance. The road is on the route of the South West Coast Path and is popular with walkers, for both short walks and those interested in walking longer stretchers of the coast path. From the car park a path continues round onto the north and west facing sides of Northam Burrows and eventually takes the walker to the Burrows Information Centre. The centre is open from the end of May to early September and the toilet facilities from Easter to the end of October. Plan your trip as they are a good twenty minutes walk from the car park. To the south west of the toll road is an open area of grassland and rush which is home to grazing sheep and horses and gradually merges with the Royal North Devon Golf Club course.

View of grazing animals on grassland with the roof of the Burrows Information Centre in the distance.

MAN'S IMPACT / LEISURE ACTIVITIES

There is some evidence of man's impact in the bay. The most obvious is the access road and stone bridge which crosses the key drainage stream from the grassland into the bay. The bridge is a good spot for occasional sightings of kingfishers.



The small stone road bridge



The end of the road and car park

Large rocks have been placed along the shore to help protect the elevated road which has been built across the saltmarsh. This now acts as a dam and has resulted in a large proportion of the original saltmarsh being reclaimed. Large concrete blocks can be seen in the mud flats which are probably remnants from the Second World War. To the left of the car park are a number of fenced off small grassed hillocks which cover an earlier landfill tip for local refuse. In the centre of the mudflats are the remains of what is thought to be an old jetty.



Remnants of World War II



Old jetty

Leisure activities revolve mainly around walking, family pursuits, enjoying the surroundings and views, plus of course, excellent bird watching opportunities. The best time to see the estuary based birds is 1 – 2 hours on either side of high tide. This is not a bay for swimming or 'in sea' activities.

COMPOSITION OF THE BAY

Visitors to the Skern will not find rock formations or rock pools. It is an environment of mudflats, salt-marsh, and beach which combine to offer rich pickings for a wide variety of birdlife especially winter visitors. It is sheltered from the Atlantic rollers allowing the incoming tide to cover the extensive mudflats with relative calm.

The only sandy beach is at the northern end of the Skern in front of the car park. The sand is covered with washed up shells of the common nut-shells (*Nucula nucleus*), the common cockle (*Cerastoderma edule*), small mussel shells and small pebbles.



Main area of beach



Pebbles and shells on beach



The northern edge of the Skern is protected from tide and weather by a naturally formed pebble ridge.

Over time estuaries fill with fine sediment which eventually settle and build up to become mudflats. As the tide recedes water drains from the marshes and cuts small channels which in turn become deep gullies. They are also increased by erosion of the gully sides which may be undercut and therefore collapse.



Deep gullies in mudflats



Salt-marsh at low tide

There are few visible plants here but mats of green algae carpet the surface of the mud on the lower mudflats. Further up the shore it is replaced by glasswort which grows nearer the high tide mark due to its inability to withstand submergence for long periods of time. Sea blite can also be found in this area. Once the plants are established they begin to slow the flow of water which causes more sediment to be deposited. As the mud becomes higher and drier, colonies of new species begin to form like red fescue which is grazed by sheep during the summer months. Large rocks covered in bladder wrack can also be found in the mudflats.

Exploring the mud can be a very messy business and necessitates a pair of good wellies and a keen eye for the incoming tide. The mud is rich in microscopic algae and organic matter, a mix which provides a rich food supply for lower spire shells and lug worms whose presence can be identified by the coiled casts left behind at the surface. The godwits probe for small specimens of the peppery-furrow shell, which lives up to 15cm below the mud. With luck and some searching shore crabs can also be found half buried in the mud as they await their next meal.



Glasswort growing on mudflats



Spartina Cordgrass growing on mudflats

The mudflats and salt-marshes provide an important source of food for wintering birds. Time of year, time of day, wind direction and level of tide all impact upon what can be seen at any particular time, but the more common species are listed below. Because of the distances involved a pair of binoculars or better still a spotting scope and a field guide will add to the enjoyment and success of a birding visit.



Brent geese feeding at low tide.



Gulls resting on salt-marsh at high tide.

More common birds to be seen in the bay and surrounding grasslands.

Oystercatcher
 Shelduck
 Little Egret
 Wigeon
 Herring Gull
 Lapwing
 Crow
 Magpie
 Linnet
 Swallow
 Skylark
 Dunnock

Redshank
 Brent Goose
 Ringed Plover
 Dunlin
 Great Black-backed Gull
 Cormorant
 Jackdaw
 Starling
 Pied Wagtail
 Wheatear
 Stonechat
 House Sparrow

Curlew
 Grey Plover
 Golden Plover
 Heron
 Black Headed Gull
 Kestrel
 Rook
 Blackbird
 Rock Pipit
 Goldfinch
 Chaffinch
 Greenfinch

Less common birds to be seen in the bay and surrounding grasslands.

Greenfinch
Sedge Warbler
House Martin
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Bar-tailed Godwit

Greenshank
Meadow Pipit
Whimbrel
Peregrine
Black-tailed Godwit

Chiffchaff
Grasshopper Warbler
Kingfisher
Spotted Redshank
Little Owl