

Background to this site

The Blyth estuary is part of the Northumberland Shore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. This site provides important feeding and roosting grounds for overwintering waders, most notably the purple sandpiper which is present in nationally significant numbers from August—May, when it can be observed feeding on the mussel beds at low water. The mussels and associated intertidal community also form a major component in the diet of large numbers of other species including turnstone, oystercatcher, eider duck, curlew, redshank, knot and dunlin. Otters are also known to use the estuary.

The mussel beds which support these important bird aggregations are included on the OSPAR (Annex V) list of threatened and declining species and habitats. Mussels are filter-feeding molluscs which feed on algae, detritus and organic matter in the water column. Mussel beds also provide a hard substrate and shelter for colonies of other intertidal organisms such as barnacles, marine worms, crabs and gastropods.

Walking on mussel beds can result in increased mortality where mussels are smothered or crushed. Digging amongst the mussels can also cause smothering where holes are not backfilled. In addition to increased disturbance, there is concern that a decline in the mussel beds on the Blyth estuary will have a knock-on effect for the birds that use the site. In order to monitor the health of the mussel beds, since January 2015, NIFCA have been conducting monthly surveys of the site.



Bait collection Code of Conduct

NIFCA have developed a voluntary code of conduct for bait collection on the Blyth estuary in order to protect the mussel beds and minimise disturbance for birds and other wildlife at the site:

1. Respect local byelaws and private land ownership

- Bait collection is limited to **personal use only** and collectors have no legal right to collect bait commercially without the permission of the landowner (Blyth Harbour Commission).
- Disposal of shells at sea or on the foreshore without a licence (issued by the Marine Management Organisation) is prohibited by Annex II of the OSPAR convention.

2. Use sustainable fishing practises

- Only take mussels above the recommended minimum size of **45mm** shell length.
- Avoid walking directly on live mussels where possible.
- Backfill holes (or use a bait pump) to avoid smothering mussels.

3. Care for the environment

- Avoid low tide feeding areas on the northern banks of the estuary (see map).
- Leave the site as you found it: take **ALL** litter home with you.
- Keep noise to a minimum and keep dogs on a lead at all times.

4. If you are concerned about irresponsible activity or bad practice at this site please report it to the NIFCA office: Tel 01670797676 Email nifca@nifca.gov.uk

