

Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands

Categories approved by Recommendation 4.7 of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

NOTE: It is important that you read the accompanying *Explanatory Note and Guidelines* document before completing this form.

1. Date this sheet was completed/updated:

01. 09. 90

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Designation date

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Site Reference Number

2. Country:

France

3. Name of wetland:

Marais du Cotentin et du Bessin

Baie des Veys

4. Geographical coordinates: 49°23' N, 01°10' W

5. Altitude: (average and/or max. & min.)

0-5m

6. Area: (in hectares) 32,500 ha

7. Overview: (general summary, in two or three sentences, of the wetland's principal characteristics)

The marshes of the Marais du Cotentin et du Bessin cover the bottom lands of four river valleys, namely the Taute, Douve, Aure and Vire. They are subject to regular winter flooding and extend downstream to the Baie des Veys, which is also part of the Ramsar site.

They are exceptional for several reasons: their vast area, the presence of permanently wet lands, the mosaic of vegetation strata and the calm conditions which prevail during birds' mating season.

The Cotentin peat bogs cover 15-16,000 ha, making them the largest peat reserve in France. The mosaic of biotopes (meadows, heath, expanses of water) encourages many bird species to nest. For migratory birds the Marais du Cotentin play a prime role due to their position on waterfowl migration routes.

In summer, farming activities in the marshland complement those on the surrounding higher ground.

8. Wetland Type (please circle the applicable codes for wetland types as listed in Annex I of the *Explanatory Note and Guidelines* document.)

marine-coastal: A . B . C . D . E . F . G . H . I . J . K

inland: L . M . N . O . P . Q . R . Sp . Ss . Tp . Ts
. U . Va . Vt . W . Xf . Xp . Y . Zg . Zk

man-made: 1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9

Please now rank these wetland types by listing them from the most to the least dominant:

9. Ramsar Criteria: (please circle the applicable criteria; see point 12, next page.)

1a . 1b . 1c . 1d | 2a . 2b . 2c . 2d | 3a . 3b . 3c | 4a . 4b

Please specify the most significant criterion applicable to the site:

10. Map of site included? Please tick **yes** -or- **no**

(Please refer to the *Explanatory Note and Guidelines* document for information regarding desirable map traits) IGN map no. 6, scale 1:100,000.

11. Name and address of the compiler of this form:

section 1 in French original

Please provide additional information on each of the following categories by attaching extra pages (please limit extra pages to no more than 10):

12. Justification of the criteria selected under point 9, on previous page. (Please refer to Annex II in the *Explanatory Note and Guidelines* document). This site can be included in the list of wetlands of international importance on the basis of the following criteria approved at the third Conference of the Contracting Parties:

1a: whilst being an exceptional wetland in terms of size and ecological diversity it is also a good representative example of western European coastal wetlands, with meadows typically subject to flooding lying in open country. It is the largest flatland area of peat in France.

2a and 2b: The site is probably of international importance in application of these two criteria, although no precise scientific research into the specific details has been conducted.

3a and 3c: Site regularly receiving 20,000 birds during the migration season and for wintering. Site of international importance for :

- brent goose *Branta bernicla*
- ringed plover *Charadrius hiaculata*
- black-bellied plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
- common snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
- whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* when migrating.

The site is also home to corncrake *Crex crex* colonies, a species included in the latest edition of the ICBP world red list.

13. General location: (include the nearest large town and its administrative region)

The Marais are situated 250 km west of Paris in the Manche (Cotentin peninsula) and Calvados départements in the Basse-Normandie region; the two départements meet in the Baie des Veys.

The limits of the Ramsar site are the natural limits of the bottom lands of the four river valleys; Taute, Douve, Vire and Aure.

14. Physical features: (e.g. geology, geomorphology; origins - natural or artificial; hydrology; soil type; water quality; water depth water permanence; fluctuations in water level; tidal variations; catchment area; downstream area; climate)

The site is subject to a very marked oceanic climate with typically slight temperature differences, prevailing westerly winds and frequent rainfall.

In the marsh lands the rivers have slight gradients (1cm/100m), a low evacuation capacity compared to the amount of water captured by the catchment, and, because of the topography, outflow of water depends on the tides. The hydrological regime inherited from two centuries of management and water control has led to alternating flooding in winter and drying out in spring and summer. A system of sluice gates downstream prevents salt water from flowing upwards to the marshes.

Peat is still the major soil component, although it can be concealed under surface mineral strata. The peat strata emerge in the valleys, but the nature and thickness of surface formations differ greatly in the transition zones with the upper slopes, and cause a variety of local conditions. Peat strata play a decisive role in the changes in height of ground water tables.

15. Hydrological values: (groundwater recharge, flood control, sediment trapping, shoreline stabilisation etc)

This almost uninterrupted stretch of marsh is the largest in north and north-west France, and opens out into the sea: to a considerable degree, many habitats have maintained the ecological integrity they inherited from centuries of balancing between a natural environment and human activities.

The site has great diversity resulting from the combined influence of hydrological, edaphic and anthropic factors, etc.... its rich fauna certainly benefits from this diversity.

16. Ecological features: (main habitats and vegetation types)

Vegetation is mainly herbaceous, with the rich and diverse plant communities depending on local conditions and the sort of human activities present. Floristic diversity depends on whether grassland is harvested or grazed. There are three principal formation types:

“transformed marsh” with flora comparable to that present in the mesophytic meadows of the higher bocage country; hygrophilous plants are rare.

“common marsh” natural grazed or harvested meadows subject to flooding; flora tend to take over if human activity is abandoned: floristic species include distinctly hygrophilous plants: this part of the marsh is of high ecological interest, since it is characteristic of an agro-system.

“peat bogs” where meadows keep some of their original peatland flora, mixed with “common” hygrophytes where farming has not changed the environment too much. This type of marsh consists of alkaline peat bogs (molinaie (term used in French original - possibly from molène, Eng. mullein *Verbascum thapsus*), *cladium*, reed beds, *megaphorbia*, heath, or acid peat moss.

This Ramsar site is a particularly favourable wetland for waterfowl because the bay and marsh complement each other: anatidae, in particular, feed in the marshes by day and sleep in the bay at night.

The following species have been observed:

migratory: anatidae, waders, perching birds, and several sea bird species.

species which winter in the marshes: mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, wigeon *Anas penelope*, northern spoonbill *Anas clypeata*, pintail *Anas acuta*, and green-winged teal *Anas creca* all linked to intermittently flooded land: jack snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus*, common snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*, all linked to non-submerged meadows.

species nesting in the marshes:

*nesters characteristic of open habitats with a clear horizon: skylark *Alauda arvensis* and meadow pipit *Anthis pratensis*.

*nesters in wet meadows: corn crake *Crex crex*, lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava*, and black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*: when there is a stretch of water nearby, they are joined by green-winged teal *Anas creca* and northern spoonbill *Anas clypeata*.

*nesters in wet meadows with dominant rushes: common snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* and sedge warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*.

*nesters on peat heathland: green-winged teal *Anas creca*, Montagu’s harrier *Circus pygargus*, marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, grasshopper warbler *Locustella naevia* and curlew *Numenius arquata*.

*nesters in reed beds: water rail *Rallus aquaticus*, reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, and Savi’s warbler *Locustella luscinioides*.

Other species nest in the marshes: mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Cetti’s warbler *Cettia cetti*, marsh warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* in shrublands: little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius* along river banks and black-headed gull *Larus ridibundus* on tracts of water.

*rare or endangered species: 22.

The site is also rich in fish (predominantly carp) which the bird population depends on.

17. Noteworthy flora: (indicating, e.g., which species/communities are unique, rare, endangered or biogeographically important, etc)

acid peat moss species: *Drosera intermedia* etc...

peatmeadow species: *Epipactis*... see section 23 in French original

18. Noteworthy fauna: (indicating, e.g., which species are unique, rare, endangered, abundant or biogeographically important; include count data, etc.)

Birds:

international importance:

- brent goose *Branta bernicla*
- ringed plover *Charadrius hiaculata*
- black-bellied plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
- common snipe *Gallinago gallinago* 30-40 % of French population
- whimbrel -migration- *Numenius phaeopus*

European importance:

- Montagu's harrier *Circus pygargus* 15-20% of the population of northern France
- hobby *Falco subbuteo*
- corncrake *Crex crex* 15-20% of the French nesting population

national importance:

- six nesting species of duck: this site is one of few regions with such diversity. Most noteworthy are pintail *Anas acuta*, green-winged teal *Anas crecca*, garganay *Anas querquedula*, and northern spoonbill *Anas clypeata*
- marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
- water rail *Rallus aquaticus*
- lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* 5% of French population
- curlew *Numenius arquata* 5% of French population
- black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa* 10-20% of French population

Since 1980 a few pairs (4-5 or more) of white stork *Ciconia ciconia* have started to nest regularly. Marsh warblers *Acrocephalus palustris* nest here at the northern limit of their range.

Mammals: common seal *Phoca vitulina* and otter *Lutra lutra*.

19. Social and cultural values: (e.g. fisheries production, forestry, religious importance, archaeological site etc.)

The site is an exceptional natural and landscape heritage. Economic, farming and fishing activities are anchored in tradition and must be continued to maintain ecological equilibrium.

20. Land tenure/ownership of:

(a) site: private and local authority (commune) holdings; State-owned offshore waters and rivers

21. Current land use:

Multicrop and livestock farming activities combine use of wet meadows in the marshes and the nearby bocage (small woods and pasture plots). The marsh is therefore a part of a larger exploitation system providing forage (early pasture, harvesting and winter feed, supplementary grazing during dry weather). The marshes are prime hunting grounds, with 25,600 licences issued annually in the Manche département including 10,500 for waterfowl. Hunters have taken over large tracts of reserve land and have acquired the necessary technical and regulatory tools for rational management of the "waterfowl resource". Fishing associations are tackling the problem of maintaining fish stocks and developing spawning grounds. There is very little tourism.

22. Factors (past, present or potential) adversely affecting the site's ecological character, including

changes in land use and development projects:

Recent changes in the farm economy (milk quotas) mean that there is a real risk that all farming in the marsh will be abandoned. This would inevitably lead to the gradual regrowth of natural woodland (willow groves), in the longer term causing many of the floristic and faunistic features of interest to disappear.

The project to create a Regional Nature Park should be completed in 1990. Its principal aim is to maintain extensive agriculture through management agreements.

There is a plan to extend peat digging at Baupte for which an environmental impact procedure and assessment are under way.

THREATS AND PROBLEMS

- no more farming, causing afforestation of the marshes;
- problems in water management, incorrect drainage control;
- use of fertilisers (degradation through species banalisation and groundwater pollution);
- unlicensed camping.

23. Conservation measures taken: (national category and legal status of protected areas - including any boundary changes which have been made: management practices; whether an officially approved management plan exists and whether it has been implemented)

Regulatory measures to protect species are already applied over more than 2,000 ha. To the west of the Baie des Veys, the polders of the Beauguillot nature reserve and the Sainte-Marie-du-Mont game reserve provide a haven for anatidae and waders. Estimates put the number of wintering birds there at 120,000. 390 ha of the offshore area are also classified as a nature reserve.

In July 1987 public river reserves were created on the Vire and the Taute Rivers (9.6 km and 2.5 km in length respectively). The first sector provides refuge for birds during cold winters. The second is a buffer zone which protects the neighbouring game reserve, Saint-Georges-de-Bohon (165 ha), which, like the Marais de la Plaine game reserve, is managed by the national hunting authorities (Office National de la Chasse) and the Manche département Hunters' Federation.

The 505 ha Gorges reserve, created in 1967, was originally intended for waterfowl. The marsh there has lost some of its wetland features due to a lowering of groundwater levels caused by nearby peat digging activities.

The assemblage comprising the Sangsurière and Adriennerie game reserves has an area of 400 ha. The Adriennerie marsh is protected by a biotope decree, and a nature reserve creation procedure is under way for both marshes (1990). The creation in 1986 of the game reserve made it possible to prevent wildfowl losses. Within nature reserve boundaries, traditional management by grazing and harvesting will be promoted.

Other protection measures and sites:

- Pointe de Brévands: 181 ha acquired by the Conservatoire du Littoral (coastal protection authority)
- MAR project in the Baie des Veys (IUCN)
- All of the Cotentin and Aure marshes classified as ZNIEFF (Natural Zone of Ecological, Floristic and Faunistic Interest)
- Whole lower valley area of the Cotentin and Baie des Veys awarded EEC designation in January 1990, according to the terms of EEC Directive 79/409 on the preservation of wildfowl, based on the Cotentin Wetlands Charter adopted in 1989.

24. Conservation measures proposed but not yet implemented: (e.g. management plan in preparation; officially proposed as a protected area etc.)

The general principle of reconciling the concerns of maintaining farming and protecting the natural heritage is the only way of assuring that the marshes have a lasting future. This is the basis for action within the future Regional Natural Park which is now under study. Through management agreements the maintenance of extensive farming will be promoted, initially on all local authority marsh holdings and, at

a later stage, on private lands.

The purpose of the park will also be to improve water quality, to manage watercourses and to develop fish stocks. In addition, a system of management agreements will be on offer in 1991 to those farmers wishing to apply environmentally friendly methods (European regulation EC 797/85 Article 13).

25. Current scientific research and facilities: (e.g. details of current projects; existence of field station etc.)

26. Current conservation education: (e.g. visitors centre, hides, information booklet, facilities for school visits etc.)

Public awareness campaigns run by the Regional Nature Park could be of educational value.

27. Current recreation and tourism: (state if wetland is used for recreation/tourism; indicate type and frequency/intensity)

Fishing, hunting, pleasure boating.

28. Jurisdiction: (territorial e.g. state/region and functional e.g. Dept of Agriculture/Dept. of Environment etc.)

Conseil Régional de Basse-Normandie; Conseils Généraux of the Manche and Calvados départements;
State bodies: CRAE, DDAF, DDE, DDAM.

29. Management authority: (name and address of local body directly responsible for managing the wetland)

Local authorities (communes):

Marsh management bodies, landowners, farmers, Conservatoire du Littoral et des Rivages Lacustres, (national coastal and lake shore conservation authority), Office National de la Chasse, Fédération de la Chasse in the Manche département.

30. Bibliographical references: (scientific/technical only) cf. Section 29 in French original

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