

# THE SALTMARSH PROJECT

## SUMMER OF SALTMARSH

### Dart Estuary Saltmarsh – Life at the fringe of the Ocean

In celebration of World Ocean Day join our team's marine biologist Nigel Mortimer to discover more about life at the very brim of the ocean – the shoreline of the Dart Estuary. We'll take a stroll along the estuary shore and having a special look at the saltmarsh – a very special wildlife community that stores more carbon than tropical rain forest... just don't expect quite the same biodiversity! Meet at the village end of Stoke Gabriel Mill Dam.

Postcode TQ9 6RD, OSGR – SX848569, W3W – ///printouts.table.prowl. Dogs on leads at owners own risk – may be slippery & muddy in places, possibly sharp oyster shells. Sorry, no wheelchair access, foreshore is uneven very slippery in places. Wear good footwear, appropriate clothing to the weather, snack & drink (time dictated by the tides). Some parking nearby – charges apply. Café & toilets at the start/finish point.

**Saturday, 8 June,  
2024 at 1pm**

Free, just turn up  
2 hours approx



### Summer Birds of the Saltmarsh and River

Join us for a delightful Summer Bird Walk, down to the Sharpham Saltmarsh with expert guide Mike Langman. The beautiful, rolling landscape of the Sharpham Estate beside the winding Dart estuary will inspire us. The walk is timed to coincide with low tide so that we will have the rare chance of walking on the Sharpham Saltmarsh. We will learn about its crucial importance as a habitat and be able to view birds foraging on the mudflats of the estuary. These will hopefully include waders, herons and egrets, wildfowl and gulls, kingfisher is always possible and perhaps a Grey Seal in the river. The walk will be an approx 2 km circular across rough ground and through long grass in places. We will go down hill to the river and then have to walk back uphill on the way back. Unfortunately the ground is unsuitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs, but babies in carriers are welcome. Parking available behind Sharpham house – this will also be the meet point. <https://www.sharphamtrust.org/mindfulness-retreats/details/summer-birds-of-the-saltmarsh>

**Saturday, 17 August,  
2024**

10.15am-12.45pm  
Adult £6; Child £4.  
20 people total Adults and children  
7 yrs and older only.  
Max 2 children per  
accompanying adult.  
Postcode: TQ9 7UT  
[outdoors@sharphamtrust.org](mailto:outdoors@sharphamtrust.org)

### Saltmarsh Boat Trips with Dart Harbour

From time to time Dart Harbour Authority & Navigation runs boat trips from Steamer Quay in Totnes to see the saltmarshes in the upper reaches of the Estuary, and the work that Dart Harbour are doing in conjunction with The Saltmarsh Project to protect them. From Totnes we will head downstream through Home Reach. Tides permitting we will nose a short way into the reedbeds at the Hole in the Wall, and then head to see the saltmarsh areas around Fleet Mill and Sharpham. We will then head back to Totnes, with the whole trip taking just over an hour. For trip details visit <https://www.dartharbour.org/the-dart-estuary/saltmarsh-boat-trips/>

**April, May, June,  
& July 2024**



### 'Salmon & Saltmarsh' with River Dart Wild Church

Continuing their signature 'sea to source' pilgrimage 'River Dart Way' River Dart Wild Church will journey in stages as a small group along the Dart. All are welcome. In May, July, September and November they will be re-visiting last year's 'Salmon & Saltmarsh' route from Dartmouth to Dartington, in collaboration with the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) and in support of Living Dart: The Saltmarsh Project. Bookings will be available through BPT. Booking will be through BPT.

**Sunday May 5th**

Dartmouth to Dittisham

**Sunday July 7th**

Dittisham to Cornworthy

**Sunday Sept 1st**

Cornworthy to Ashprington

**Sunday Nov 3rd**

Ashprington to Totnes

# LIVING DART: THE SALTMARSH PROJECT

**Exploring saltmarshes along the Dart Estuary, sharing river knowledge, finding paths to understanding and action for communities of interest. How can we help to protect this vital ecosystem and carbon store?**



Saltmarshes occupy the niche right at the top of the foreshore—the area that's covered and uncovered by the tide, which is very narrow. It's common to think that saltmarshes are covered by every tide, but if that was the case, that habitat would be dominated either by seaweeds or mudflats and, if it's rough enough, by marine animals such as limpets and barnacles. Most of the estuaries in the Southwest are 'ria-type estuaries' or drowned river valleys. A feature of these is that they have very steep sides, which makes our saltmarshes very narrow—they form at, and beyond, the upper foreshore, as that's the only place they can survive.

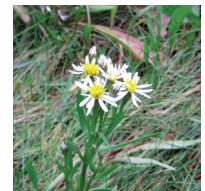
The Dart Estuary's saltmarshes are covered by tidal waters either most days or very occasionally. They are home to land plants, rather than seaweeds, which have adapted in order to be able to cope with the salt. If it's not salty enough, land plants will be able to out-compete them because they're just a bit more aggressive. Whereas if there's salt there, the salt is toxic to most plants, which pushes the land plants back and allows the saltmarsh plants to flourish.

As well as plants, saltmarshes support wildlife that has adapted to the salt. There are a lot of salt-tolerant insects that you don't normally see further down the shore. One of the impacts of climate change is that when the sea level rises the saltmarsh would ideally migrate up the foreshore with the rise. But in a built environment, where there is a wall or structure it results in 'habitat squeeze'. The saltmarsh will rise to a point where it can't get back any further but the sea level will keep rising, so the saltmarsh will get narrower and narrower until there's potentially none left. And in the Dart Estuary where we've historically built over so much land, we've had a huge influence on the landscape.

The Dart Estuary's saltmarshes need our attention because they are diminishing in health and extent, through the cumulative impact of our human activities and misunderstanding. We are increasingly realising their worth in terms of carbon sequestration and very long-term lock-out/storage. One of the things that makes saltmarshes so special in terms of 'ecosystem services' is what they do for us.

They trap very significant amounts of carbon and take some of that down into their own roots and into the sediment. With the river flowing down from its catchment, it carries a run-off of soil and detritus—organic matter from leaves and living things. Then, as it's an estuary, a lot of natural detritus comes in with the tides from the sea as well. Because the saltmarsh is sticking up out of the bed, it slows the energy of the water and a lot of that material slows down too. So the organic carbon is being trapped within the sediment—for, tens, hundreds and even thousands of years. Unfortunately, because they're so good at trapping all this natural debris, they're also very good at trapping rubbish, so they can look like very trashy places.

Unless you recognise what you're looking at, saltmarshes are easily overlooked—they don't always look like much. The poster child of saltmarshes in our area is the sea aster. Its flower looks a bit like a michaelmas daisy in the summer months. But most of the time a lot of the saltmarsh is covered in grass. Also, one of the ways that saltmarshes adapt to the salt is to get through their whole lifecycle very quickly before the salt has a chance to knock them back. So, over the winter, they die back and all you might see is lots of dead plants.



What can we do? Starting with being on the water, if you're on any kind or size of boat: be aware of where you are, watch your wake, and watch where you land or picnic. If it's a really high tide, make sure you don't drive your boat over the top of it. In busy estuaries, with too much wake, the waves can erode the banks. If you're on a paddleboard or kayak, make sure that your paddle isn't disturbing the bottom or the saltmarsh—one paddle hit on the bottom is neither here nor there, but the problem is the cumulative impact of many small hits. We don't need to beat ourselves up if this happens, as long as we're just trying to do our best. Please be sensitive to where you're launching and retrieving paddle boards, where you're stopping for lunch, where you're paddling, and take your litter home. From the land in the immediate vicinity of a saltmarsh, it's a question of being aware of where you're walking because very often the saltmarshes are built on relatively soft mud so even a small amount of trampling will cause harm. The narrow strip of saltmarsh is exposed to all the energy of everything that's happening around it. Footpaths and people dragging their boats through the saltmarsh are also harmful. Saltmarshes are softer than stone so people often store their boats on top of them to protect the hulls.

Again, if one or two people do this it's not the end of the world but if it becomes a footpath then it becomes an issue. Also, it's important that landowners recognise where they might have saltmarshes and play a part in conserving them. Then for all of us living, working and playing within the water catchment, it's a case of doing what we can for water quality. We all need to go to the toilet and it's the job of water companies to break that down. So, there are necessarily 'nutrients' within the system. But what we don't need to do is put the remnants of our meal down the kitchen sink. Another problem can be the overuse of fertilisers we might put on our gardens—most farmers know the score by now. All of these things add up, so it's a case of being aware and doing the best we can to avoid contributing.

– From a conversation with Nigel Mortimer, Estuaries Officer at South Devon National Landscape at [bioregion.org.uk](http://bioregion.org.uk). Bird illustrations courtesy of Mike Langman.

