

Estuary

Scotland has a magnificently varied and beautiful coastal landscape with a diverse range of features from exposed cliffs to sea lochs, from long sandy beaches to nutrient-rich estuaries. This coastline measures about 11,800km in length and the Falkirk area shares just a small proportion of this along the Forth Estuary. The Forth Estuary is one of the major estuaries of the British coastline stretching for approximately 48km from its head at the tidal limit above Stirling to its mouth at the Forth Road Bridge.

The estuary supports a vast range of different plants and animals, many of which are specially adapted to survive in the unique habitats of the estuary which include saltmarsh, saltwater lagoons, and mudflats as well as the large expanse of estuarine water and constantly submerged sediment on the estuary bed.

The Estuary supports a wide range of waders and wildfowl including internationally and nationally important flocks of wintering birds such as pink-footed goose, knot, dunlin, and shelduck. The vast numbers of invertebrates found in the inter-tidal habitats are an attractive food source for these birds as well as for other aquatic species. Estuarine waters provide nursery grounds for a variety of fish. They also accommodate fish like the Atlantic salmon that migrate from sea to freshwater to spawn. The Forth Estuary is also used by various marine mammals, like seals and porpoises, as an area to feed and shelter.

While the estuary supports various rare and important habitats and numerous plants and animals, it also accommodates a wide range of human activity. Areas along the Forth Estuary, such as Grangemouth, have developed as industrial centres because of the vital transport links that the estuary can provide. In addition to this concentrated industrial activity, the estuary is also the focus of considerable fishing and recreational activity. All of these human pressures can have a significant impact on the ecological value and health of the estuary.

The conservation of our estuaries is further complicated by the consequences of natural processes and changes in our climate and sea levels. These processes mean that the future of our estuaries is to a certain extent uncertain. It thus seems prudent to ensure that our management and use of them retains or reinstates their natural ability to absorb changes such as sea level rise. With careful management human uses can be integrated into an ecologically healthy estuary.

Estuary Habitat Action plans to be included in the Falkirk Area Biodiversity Action Plan are:

- Estuary
- Mudflats
- Saline Lagoons
- Saltmarsh