

Flat Holm - The Uniqueness of Islands ...

Natural Value ...

Flat Holm, just 5 miles off the Cardiff coast has considerable natural value. The island is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest for two reasons; its large gull colony and its maritime grassland.

During the breeding season the gull colony is a significant presence on the island. The colony consists of Lesser Black Backed gulls (*Larus fuscus*), Herring gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and a pair of Great Black Backed gulls (*Larus marinus*). Flat Holm retains a breeding colony of 3732 pairs of Lesser Black Backed gulls. The Flat Holm Project considers this a position of conservation responsibility as world population figures for *Larus fuscus* are declining. These gulls are on the IUCN's Amber list, a fact that we relay to all of our visitors in light of the apparent public dislike of such birds.

The bird interest, although dominated by the gull colony, doesn't stop there. Shelduck are an attractive species which nest on the island in rabbit burrows. Despite the apparent decrease in numbers over the years, a small breeding population still remains. Oystercatchers also use the island as a breeding and a roosting site. The island provides a valuable roosting area for a variety of other birds including blackbirds, thrush, robin, wren and wood pigeon. Elderberries cause a feeding frenzy for hundreds of starlings in Autumn, while large flocks of goldfinch and other seed eaters are attracted by the teasel and thistles. Birds of prey are frequent short stay visitors though none stay to breed. Species include Buzzard, seen mainly around the cliffs, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin.

Flat Holm has a long established rabbit population and reptiles are represented good populations of slow worms and common lizard.

Maritime grassland is of considerable importance in terms of floral and associated faunal diversity. As many as 40 plants per square metre can be found on good, high quality maritime grassland. Maritime species include bucks-horn plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), sea storks bill (*Erodium maritimum*) and doves foot cranesbill (*Geranium molle*). Secondary species include common coastal plants such as thrift (*Armeria maritima*), rock sea lavender (*Limonium binervosum*) as well as grassland species like birds foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*). Conditions need to be right for maritime species to exist. The soil must be low in nutrients, as well as being shallow. Species need to be salt tolerant and able to withstand harsh coastal conditions, especially the wind. Many plants grow in a very flat, rosette to shelter from the elements.

Double Approach

Following the establishment of the Flat Holm Project in 1982 both the gull colony and the depleted maritime grassland were considered important for nature conservation and it was decided to manage the Island in two quite separate ways for these features. A concerted effort was made to restore the grassland on the north half of the Island, whilst the south half was kept as a gull colony with only minimal management. Management of the north side involved the removal of scrub, mowing, grazing and

initially chemical spraying of tall ruderal vegetation. The ecological management on Flat Holm currently represents one stage in a series of efforts to restore a species-rich, managed grassland community. The majority of effort focuses on the most species rich areas through a programme of grazing, using Soay and Texel sheep and through mechanical means including mowing.

Historic Plants

Flat Holm has a healthy population of wild leek (*Alium ampeloprasum*), and is one of the few places in Britain where this grows. The plant is thought to have been transplanted from the Augustinian community garden on the neighbouring island of Steep Holm around the 12th century. The oceanic climate of Flat Holm has proved beneficial to the leeks and they require little management. We only need to transplant stands that are under threat from soil erosion in cliff top areas. The bulk of the wild leeks are to be found on the south eastern side of the island, where they are sheltered by the buildings and cliffs.

Our Educational Contribution ...

Flat Holm prides itself on being an educational centre providing excellent standards in showing school children and adults alike, the importance of conservation, the environment and sustainability. Each season the island caters for 2000 day visitors and a further 500 residential school children. School groups range from Primary to A Level students with a range of activities tailored to suit each group. The renovated Victorian barracks provides a schoolroom for students and there are full residential facilities situated in the Farmhouse. Groups are also involved in conservation activities such as vegetation clearance from listed buildings. Flat Holm provides the opportunity for PhD research. Research is currently being conducted into the Lesser Black Backed gull colony, looking at feeding stimuli in chicks. This research will be completed next year. This year has also seen research into the diet of slow worms as part of a PhD project.

Shadows of History ...

The past military presence on Flat Holm is immediately obvious. The island is scattered with Nissan huts, ammunitions stores, gun pits and other remnants of its past use. Flat Holm has been fortified twice, first in Victorian times and then during World War II when over 350 soldiers were stationed on the island. In 1896, a cholera hospital was built on Flat Holm to allow the quarantine of infected sailors returning from abroad. Just one year later Marconi sent the first wireless message across water from Flat Holm to Lavernock.

The Warden's Role ...

The role of an island Warden is an unusual one. Every day is different, tasks varying from chopping wood, to conducting a guided tour, delivering an activity for 20 nine year olds or bruising the invasive vegetation. In addition there are countless maintenance and system checks, essential to the health and safety of all island visitors. As with most islands, the paramedics or ambulance cannot easily reach Flat Holm, so health and safety for any Warden is paramount.

The Trainee Wardens Role ...

Trainee Wardens work as volunteers on the island, staying for a period of between six months and one year. Trainee Wardens come to the island to gain experience of countryside management and environmental education, sometimes to give a better chance of paid employment in the future. They get involved in all aspects of managing the island, habitat management, wildlife monitoring, educational activities, guided tours and maintenance of historic buildings. Good social skills are required as the living arrangements are communal, with everyone cooking together and sharing rooms.

Flat Holm is open to visitors from March to October. For information visit www.cardiff.gov.uk/flatholm or call 02920 353 917

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