The brackish marsh will change
The biggest impact of the project will be on the brackish marsh (a mixture of freshwater and saltwater). In 2011, when we put a breach in the east bank, the brackish marsh will frequently flood with the tide, allowing it to develop into saltmarsh and mudflats. This new habitat is not only attractive to birds, but it is a great sea defence in its own right and will play a significant role in protecting the new northern sea defence.

Valuable new habitats
Much of the material that has been used to strengthen the new sea defences was taken from our wet grazing meadow east of Fen hide. We have allowed the excavated area to fill with water and we will encourage a new reedbed to develop here for marsh harriers, bitterns and other reedbed wildlife.

Existing habitats improved
While the path to the beach was closed in 2010, we took the opportunity to make several improvements to the fresh marsh. We created a new island for roosting wading birds and we removed encroaching vegetation for the benefit of breeding birds. These improvements should encourage avocets to breed here, thus lessening the impact of the loss of the brackish marsh. Extensive new avocet habitats have also been created at RSPB Freiston Shore and RSPB Frampton Marsh, just 19 miles away in Lincolnshire.

New nature trails
Once the new reedbed area east of Fen hide is complete, we hope to open a new nature trail along its edge as an extension of Fen Trail. This will then loop back to Fen Trail through a newly-planted area of scrub. If we can find the funding for this, the new trail will be a great asset for visitors to enjoy.

When we’ve finished
We will have improved the habitat for wading birds and ducks, geese and swans on the fresh marsh and we will create a new reedbed to the east of Fen hide for some of the UK’s most spectacular ducks, such as the bittern and marsh harrier. Visitors can already enjoy the wildlife from the new Parrinder hides. In short, by the end of 2011, we will have ensured the future of the reserve for birds and visitors for the next 50 years.

How much will this project cost?
Sea defences are likely to cost about £1.4 million. We are very grateful for the substantial funding we have received from EU Life+ Nature Fund, The Crown Estates Marine Communities Fund and from two organisations that distribute landfill tax credits: WREN (Waste Recycling Environmental) for Waste Recycling Group (WRG) and the SITA Trust. The rest will be paid by the RSPB. We have appealed to visitors and supporters of Titchwell Marsh for donations.

How can you help?
You can support the RSPB’s work by donating to the Titchwell Marsh Coastal Change Project. There is a collection box inside the visitor centre, you can send a cheque made payable to ‘The RSPB’ to RSPB Titchwell Marsh nature reserve, Titchwell, King’s Lynn, Norfolk, PE31 8BB, or visit www.rspb.org.uk/titchwellaappeal

Find out more about the project
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titchwellcoastalchange@rspb.org.uk

The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.

We belong to BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

We would like to thank the following for their support:

Front cover photo: bittern by Andy Hay. Inside: bittern by Andy Hay, marsh harrier by Ernie Janes (all rspb-images.com)
The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207018, Scotland no. SC039654 TIM-1333-10-11

TITCHWELL MARSH
COASTAL CHANGE PROJECT

Protecting the reserve for wildlife and people

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TITCHWELL MARSH
COASTAL CHANGE PROJECT
Habitats under threat
RSPB Titchwell Marsh nature reserve is under pressure. The sand dunes along our beach are being eroded by the sea. The erosion of the dunes would ultimately threaten the sea walls that protect the reserve’s valuable freshwater habitats. These habitats are home to spectacular and rare breeding birds such as bitterns, marsh harriers and bearded tits. If we allow the sea walls to fail, saltwater will enter the freshwater habitats. This would destroy the freshwater life, and it could take eight years for the habitat to recover. That would be a disaster for some of the UK’s rarest breeding birds. Even after recovery, future erosion could then easily destroy their populations again.

The options
Various options were available to protect the reserve. For example, one option would have been to strengthen the existing northern sea defence with concrete and armouring, but we do not believe this would have been appropriate for such a wild landscape. We considered various options, and we think the solution outlined below was the best way to secure the future of Titchwell Marsh.

Our solution
In autumn 2009, we started work on the Titchwell Marsh Coastal Change Project. In the first year, this project involved realigning and strengthening the sea defence to the north. In 2010, the sea defence to the west was reinforced and strengthened and in 2011 we will make changes to the sea wall to the east. This will create tidal saltmarsh, a natural sea defence, in front of the new north wall. When the project finishes at the end of October 2011, we expect to have secured the future of the reserve for several generations to come.

The brackish marsh will change
The biggest impact of the project will be on the brackish marsh (a mixture of freshwater and saltwater). In 2011, when we put a breach in the east bank, the brackish marsh will frequently flood with the tide, allowing it to develop into saltmarsh and mudflats. This new habitat is not only attractive to birds, but it is a great sea defence in its own right and will play a significant role in protecting the new northern sea defence.

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Titchwell Marsh is an exceptional nature reserve in a special area. It is part of a network of outstanding wildlife sites across Europe called Natura 2000.
What’s happened so far?

1. The dunes
Over several decades, these dunes have eroded south towards the reserve. This process will continue for the foreseeable future and ultimately will put severe pressure on the North wall, our current sea defence to the north. The new line of the beach in 50 years’ time is shown on the map just to the north of the Parrinder wall. This shows the extent of the predicted erosion.

2. Grazing meadow and pool
Prior to the start of the project, this was simply a damp grazing meadow. In 2009, material was excavated from here to build up the new sea defences. The resultant ‘hole’ has been allowed to fill naturally with water. This new pool has been landscaped and we will encourage a reedbed to establish. This will be very valuable for our specialist reedbed birds. As this area develops, we will create a new circular path to the south of the pool.

3. The new Parrinder wall
During 2009 and 2010, the existing Parrinder wall was raised and strengthened and the new wall is now an important part of our northern sea defence. Much of the material used to strengthen the wall was excavated from the grazing meadow along the southern edge of the reserve.

4. The west bank
This bank protects the freshwater marsh and reedbed from tidal flooding. However, this bank is weak in places and in a big storm, it might have allowed saltwater into the freshwater habitats. Bearded tits, marsh harriers and bitterns all breed in the reedbed and saltwater would destroy the food chain on which the birds rely. This is why in 2010 we raised and strengthened the bank, widening and resurfacing the footpath in the process.

5. The site of our proposed breach
In September 2011, we will put a breach in the existing sea defences in this location. This breach will link to the existing tidal creeks in the saltmarsh to the east of the reserve. This will allow the sea into the brackish marsh, which will turn back to tidal saltmarsh.

6. The north wall
This sea defence is coming under increasing pressure as the dunes erode southwards. It is already showing signs of erosion. It was not feasible to strengthen this wall and we will let it erode naturally.

7. The current brackish marsh
Following the breach in 2011, the brackish marsh will gradually return to tidal saltmarsh. Tidal saltmarsh is a natural and very effective sea defence. It will give excellent protection to the reserve in front of the new Parrinder wall from the slowly encroaching sea to the north, as well as providing a great habitat for wildlife.

Grand designs
The old Parrinder hide (point 3) was demolished in 2009, and in 2010 we replaced it with two new hides. Parrinder North and Parrinder South have been custom-built and incorporate several new design features, which we hope will set a new standard for birdwatching hides in the future.

Adapting for avocets
In 2010, we created a new island especially for avocets in our freshwater marsh. At the same time, some of the existing islands were redesigned to make them as perfect as possible for these elegant birds. Avocets were already using the freshwater marsh and we are confident that more will use the new facilities. The new islands will also be suitable as roost sites by other wading birds. In addition, 19 miles away in Lincolnshire, we have recently created other suitable habitat for avocets at RSPB Freiston Shore and RSPB Frampton Marsh.

History on the move
If you go down to the beach today, you will see the remains of a WWII observation tower, which just 30 years ago stood in the middle of the dunes. Today, due to coastal erosion, the ruins of the tower are well out on the beach, in front of the eroding dunes, aptly demonstrating the threat to the reserve.