

Among shifting sands

The haunting dunes of Forvie National Nature Reserve stretch along part of the North Sea coast, towering over you with the awesome grandeur of a desert. This is one of the largest sand dune systems in the UK. New shapes and colours appear in the shifting expanse of dunes, depending on which way the wind blows. Perfect for a low-level winter walk, the reserve's past is hidden under the blanket of golden grains that smothers the landscape

Forvie Trail

Forvie lies 23 km (15 miles) north of Aberdeen on the A975 Aberdeen to Peterhead road. You can walk to the reserve from Newburgh, where there are toilets and where buses stop generally every hour. This walk begins at the large car park signposted for the reserve at Waterside on the north side of the River Ythan (sounds like *eye-than*) road bridge.



The 5 km/3 mile route is marked by blue arrows and follows a rough track along the side of the estuary and then into spectacular, towering dunes. Emerging onto the beach, the route continues to the site of the cursed village of Forvie, said to have been covered by a sandstorm in the 15th century. Returning by track over heather moorland, the walk is not too steep but involves walking on rough ground and sand.





1
Forvie features one of the largest areas of blown sand in Scotland. The dunes have been built from sand carried onshore by the sea and wind.

2
It's easy to identify curlews with their long down-curved bills, which are used to probe for worms and shellfish.

1

Begin at Waterside car park and follow the track through the gate towards the trees. Just below the car park is an area of saltmarsh where lapwing and small wading birds often take shelter from the winter weather. Emerging from the trees, look for redshank, oystercatcher and curlew down on the mudflats at low tide. Carry on straight ahead, with the estuary on your right.

2

Looking across to Newburgh, you can see the quayside that once made this a busier port than Aberdeen. However, the shifting sands had to be frequently dredged to allow safe passage for the ships bringing in coal and exporting grain. The University of Aberdeen have their ocean research facility located just behind the quay, where the waters of the Ythan are now being used to study the role of the sea in climate change.

3

Follow the foreshore at this point for another 500 m/0.3 mile and look out for long-tailed duck on the water, as well as Forvie's signature bird, the eider duck. Males are black and white, and the females are brown, camouflaged for nesting in the heather at the side of the estuary. In spring, there can be up to 5,000 birds here, but the winter population drops to a few hundred. The eiders dive in the river channel to find mussels, their favourite food, which they swallow whole.

4

Stopping at the start of the large dunes on your left, a deep pile of mussel shells has been exposed in the slope. This is a midden – Bronze Age at its earliest – and shows how important the estuary has been to people over the reserve's history. Through medieval times, people harvested mussels intensively to provide bait for haddock line fishing. When mussel harvesting ended in the 1960s, the numbers of eider duck on the Ythan soared and it became the UK's largest breeding population.

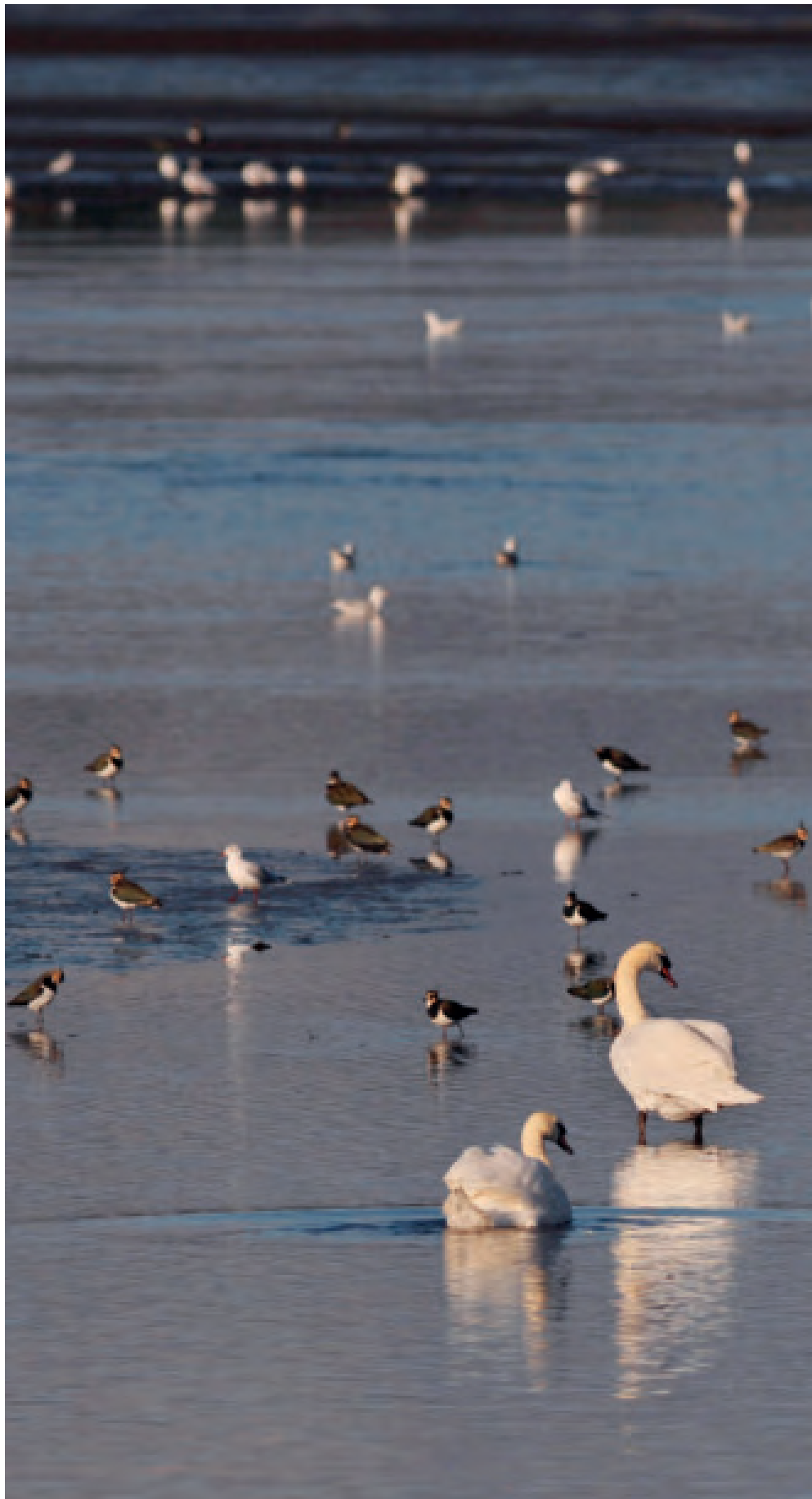
5

Clamber back up to the path and turn right to follow the grass-covered route up a slope to some stone steps at the top. Enjoy the view over the estuary and then carry on into the heart of the dunes. From the late 18th century, smugglers hid their illegal goods here by digging pits, which they lined with sail cloth. You never know what the shifting sands might reveal next! Look out for snow buntings searching for marram grass seeds. These striking small birds migrate to Forvie from their arctic summer breeding grounds.

6

Wander through the dunes, which were once visited by T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia fame) and imagine yourself in warmer climes! Once on the beach, turn left to follow the coast to the rocky shore at the north end. A salmon weather vane and a small burn mark the track off the beach. The weather vane was made by the salmon fishers who used to net the beach at Forvie until the tradition ended in 2000.

3
The Ythan Estuary attracts tens of thousands of birds every winter to roost and feed, like these lapwings and swans.



7

A little farther on you find a salmon fisher himself – one of the characters in the Forvie village story trail. Lift the panel to read about him, then turn up the grassy slope to your right to find more characters and Forvie Kirk. The ruined walls date to the 12th century and mark the site of a medieval village, now lost beneath the sand. A local story tells of the curse laid on Forvie by three daughters who were due to inherit the land, but were cast adrift at sea instead. In fact, the village was slowly lost to the advancing sands over many years, so it's unlikely that much evidence remains under the dunes.



4

8

Return to the track via some stone steps and a small wooden bridge to find another two story trail characters. Turn right on the track to head towards an open moorland landscape. Unusually, the marram grass of the beach grows here with heathers and also bright lichens. This mix of plants is one of the protected habitats at Forvie as it's rare or threatened elsewhere in Europe. Forvie was once a grouse moor, but nowadays you might see short-eared owls hunting by day, or roe deer bounding away into the distance.



5

9

Eventually, the track passes a stand of willow trees, which is one of the few tree species that can survive the strong winds and shifting sand at Forvie. As the track starts to slope back downhill, you get a magnificent view over the estuary and Newburgh. The low hill between the field and the estuary is an esker, left behind where a crack formed at the base of retreating ice sheets 10,000 years ago. Finally, look out for buzzards soaring on the thermals above the slopes.



Forvie is one of over 50 National Nature Reserves in Scotland. Find out more at www.nnr-scotland.org.uk

4
You may see a short-eared owl hunting over the moor for small mammals, especially voles.

5
A winter walk on a frost covered beach.

6
Marram grass in winter light with frost still on the ground.

Essential information

Forvie NNR lies 25 km/15 miles north of Aberdeen. Stagecoach bus service 263, Aberdeen to Peterhead via Cruden Bay, stops at Newburgh.

OS maps

Landranger 38 (Aberdeen)
Explorer 421 (Ellon & Inverurie)

Trail length

5 km/3 miles from Waterside car park.

Terrain

The start and end of the walk are on a rough farm track with potholes and sand-filled hollows. The route along the estuary is on a wide path, surfaced with short grass, or on pebbled foreshore. The route also takes in bare sand dunes and the beach itself. Gradients are mostly low, but there are some short slopes over the dunes and on the return track.

Dogs

The beach by the sea is a good place to let your dog run free. The estuary and moorland are sensitive parts of the reserve because of the birds that shelter there. Please make sure you keep your dog on a short lead or under close control there, and always pick up waste, disposing of it in the bins at the car park. Dog bags are available from the car park.

Further information

The Forvie Centre at the north end of the reserve has

toilets and information about the area. Open daily 10am to 5pm April to October, and then Monday to Friday (staff permitting) between November and March. Entry is free.

Alternative trails, including an easy-access route with wheelchair-accessible picnic tables, start and end at the Forvie Centre.

The Forvie leaflet is available in alternative formats, including large print and audio format at www.snh.org.uk/pubs

Nearby natural attractions

Situated between Fraserburgh and Peterhead, the Loch of Strathbeg is Britain's largest dune loch and a joy to visit at any time of year. In winter, thousands of wild geese, swans and ducks fly in, including 20% of the world's population of pink-footed geese. The visitor centre is open every day from 8am – 6pm (or dusk if earlier). The Tower Pool, Fen and Bay hides are open from dawn to dusk daily, except Christmas and New Year's Day. See www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/1/lochofstrathbeg

A couple of miles north of Cruden Bay lie the Bullers o' Buchan, some stunning natural arches eroded into rock faces. Over time, the sea has carved caves and inlets into the cliffs, making them spectacular to walk round. At the extreme point of this circular chasm is an area known as 'The Pot', where the sea rushes in through a natural archway. The drops here are sudden and long, so do take care. Children and dogs should be carefully supervised. There's a car park for the site on the A975 road 2.5 km/1 mile northeast of Cruden Bay. Park here and follow the signs. You can also stop off here using the regular bus service between Peterhead and Aberdeen.

