

# Caerlaverock

National Nature Reserve

**SCOTTISH  
NATURAL  
HERITAGE**



## **'Mud and Merse'**

**Welcome to Caerlaverock! This outstanding National Nature Reserve has long been a special place for wildlife. Early settlers recognised this when they named the area Caerlaverock, meaning 'castle of the lark.'**

**Lying on the Solway Firth, Caerlaverock embraces a vast stretch of sea, mudflats and 'merse' (the local name for saltmarsh). It's a remarkable location, with dramatic coastal scenery and a rich range of wildlife. Come in spring or summer and listen for the dusk chorus of natterjack toads, admire the flower-studded merse or watch the soaring skylarks. Visit during autumn, winter or spring and enjoy the wonderful display of wintering wildfowl, when tens of thousands of geese, ducks and wading birds gather at the reserve. At Caerlaverock you're guaranteed a memorable wildlife experience at any time of the year.**

## **Long Haul Flights**

The grasses and clover of the merse are eaten by wild geese, ducks and swans. This plentiful food supply draws tens of thousands of long-distance travellers to Caerlaverock every year, where they winter on the reserve from late September through till March.

The visitors include wild barnacle geese that have flown from Svalbard, a group of Norwegian islands in the Arctic Ocean. The geese breed on the islands in summer but can't survive the severe winter weather conditions. They therefore head south on a 2000 mile journey to the milder feeding grounds of the Solway. Caerlaverock presently shelters about 20,000 barnacle geese – a big leap, as there were fewer than 1000 here in 1957. Whooper swans, pink-footed geese and pintail ducks are also far travelled, touching down from Iceland and northern Europe.

## **Caerlaverock Calls**

There's open access to the reserve except in the sanctuary area. You can get hold of further information and leaflets from the local SNH office or SNH exhibition trailer. It will be at Castle Corner car park or one of the other parking areas.

Please wear appropriate clothing when visiting – wellies are a good idea for walking on the merse. Take care with the tides as they come in fast and

quickly cover the mudflats. High tides can often cover the merse as well.

Close by are .....

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust have had a centre at Caerlaverock since 1970. They manage their farmland and merse for wildlife and provide important feeding areas for wild geese over the winter. Visit their Wetlands Centre for wonderful close-range birdwatching. Phone 01387 770200 for further information.

Historic Scotland manage Caerlaverock Castle. At their Visitor Centre you can explore the stormy, war-torn history of this impressive landmark. Phone 01387 770244 for further information.

### **Toad Runners**

The only place in Scotland you'll find rare natterjack toads is here on the Solway coast. However, you're more likely to hear natterjacks than see them – listen for their loud, raucous calls on spring and summer evenings. At Caerlaverock they mainly live on the fringes of the merse, hunting for beetles, spiders, snails and worms. Natterjacks breed in shallow pools and hibernate in sandy banks. They're different from other frogs and toads because they can move quickly, running rather than crawling.

## **A Place in History**

Caerlaverock's human history dates back at least 8000 years to the Stone Age when roaming tribes first arrived in search of food. Fishing and wildfowling (the hunting of wild geese and ducks) have both had a long history here. During the Bronze Age (3500 years ago) people settled Caerlaverock permanently and began clearing trees and creating farmland. These settlers were followed by Iron Age farmers, Romans, Vikings and medieval peoples.

You can find relics of Caerlaverock's human history on the gentle summit of Ward Law, just behind the reserve. The hill has the remains of Iron Age and Roman forts. However, the area's most romantic ruin is Caerlaverock Castle, a once mighty fortress that survived four centuries of medieval bloodshed. Its location provided a natural defence as the shifting river channels and vast mudflats were treacherous for enemies to cross.

## **All Together Now**

The National Nature Reserve was set up in 1957 through agreement with Caerlaverock Estate. The estate owner, the Duke of Norfolk, recognised the importance of protecting the area by ensuring that farming, fishing, wildfowling and conservation worked together.

Today, Caerlaverock's merse continues to provide important summer cattle grazing for coastal farms.

The grazing also benefits nature conservation as it keeps the merse short, which is essential for both natterjacks and geese. SNH runs a merse management scheme to help maintain this cattle grazing.

Wildfowling also continues here but it is controlled by a permit scheme and only takes place within a special shooting zone. There's an agreed 'sanctuary area' as well in which there's absolutely no disturbance.

### **Lifting and Shifting**

The Solway Firth is a place of constant change. Beneath its surface, swirling currents carry huge amounts of sand and mud into and out of the estuary. These sediments settle in sheltered areas of the Firth where tidal currents aren't so strong.

At Caerlaverock these sediments have slowly been building into mudflats – a process that's been going on since the last Ice Age some 11,000 years ago. The biggest ones are Priestside Bank and Blackshaw Bank, which extend for up to 5km from dry land.

### **Mud Glorious Mud**

The mudflats offer rich pickings for birds – worms, snails, cockles, crabs and shrimps provide a seafood feast. Wading birds are well adapted to hunting here: Their long legs make it easy to walk through pools and their splayed toes can balance on soft, slippery mud. Some also have long beaks to reach far into the mud and lift out prey. You'll find

waders like oystercatchers and curlew at Caerlaverock for most of the year. They only move inland in summer to breed.

## **Solway Survivors**

It's tough for plants on the coast – they're covered by salty water twice a day and battered by wind and storms. However, some hardy ones are able to make the Caerlaverock mudflats their home.

Plants like glasswort arrive first, trapping sand and silt to stabilise the mud's shifting surface. In the right conditions this mud, silt and sand builds up and allows other plants to take hold. These are salt tolerant and can withstand being covered by the tides. Together they form merse (saltmarsh), and the Caerlaverock collection includes sea aster, sea spurrey, sea milkwort and thrift.

The most salt tolerant plants live on the merse edge where it meets the mudflats – these plants are covered longest by the tides. Closer to land, less salt tolerant rushes and grasses take root until eventually full grassland develops.

But the merse doesn't stay the same. Over time it grows or shrinks due to changes in river channels and estuary currents. So at Kirkconnell the merse is presently spreading, whereas east of the River Nith some areas are eroding.

## **Getting to Caerlaverock**

To reach Caerlaverock take the B725 road south from Dumfries to Glencaple/Bankend, following the east bank of the River Nith. The nearest railway and coach stations are in Dumfries and there's a limited bus service to Caerlaverock.

For more information please contact:

Scottish Natural Heritage  
Caerlaverock Reserve Office  
Hollands Farm Road  
Caerlaverock  
Dumfries  
DG1 4RS  
Tel: 01387 770275

Scotland's natural heritage is a local, national and global asset. SNH promotes its care and improvement, its responsible enjoyment, greater understanding, appreciation and sustainable use, now and for future generations.

Scotland has over 40 National Nature Reserves for you to explore and enjoy.

Click on – [www.nnr-scotland.org.uk](http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk) for some natural inspiration!