



Ramsar Convention

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Concerns regarding change of ecological character within Ramsar site 807 Sandblåst-/ Gaustadvågen Nature Reserve

Sandblåstvågen-/ Gaustadvågen is an internationally important site for waterbirds and is designated under the Ramsar Convention. The area is also designated as a nature reserve. One of the prime reasons for protection is due to the importance for staging migratory birds, as well as the area's importance for various breeding birds. BirdLife Norway are concerned about both the status and the management of the area, and therefore wish to inform the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention about the current situation.

Although the function of the site for non-breeding and staging birds is not completely documented, we are aware that the site's importance has been considerably reduced after the site received protected status. Formerly there were good populations of several species including several that are regionally rare. At present, all the regionally rare species that formerly occurred are no longer present as breeding birds. In addition, most of the other species are present in smaller numbers than formerly.

About the Ramsar site

Sandblåst- / Gaustadvågen was officially declared as a nature reserve on 27th May 1988, the purpose of which was to safeguard an important area of wetland and its environs, birdlife and other lifeforms. In 1996 Sandblåst- / Gaustadvågen received status as a Ramsar Site.

The following information is presented on [Ramsar Site Information Service](#), *the site is a typical well-developed estuary where three small rivers converge, forming a system of sheltered brackish lagoons and extensive intertidal mudflats with wet meadows. Its salinity varies from freshwater to brackish and finally salt water. A total of 250 different bird species have been recorded. The Site's high biological production, extensive beds of aquatic vegetation, and invertebrate populations support large numbers of migrating birds and numerous wintering swans, geese, ducks and waders. Particularly high numbers of birds gather here during the autumn migration, with regular counts of several hundred whooper swans (Cygnus cygnus) and various ducks and waders. Several waterbird species as well as the European otter (Lutra lutra) breed at the Site. Botanically the area is also extremely valuable. The large system of brackish meadows and salt marshes, which are well developed in Sandblåstvågen, are notable for this part of the county. Road construction and urban wastewater may have affected the ecosystem. Human activities include agriculture, recreation*

and research, while birdwatching takes place throughout the year and there is a viewing facility.



Figure 1. Delination of the boundary of Sandblåst- / Gaustadvågen Nature Reserve, including the adjacent Knarrashaugmyra Nature Reserve.

Reduction in breeding bird populations

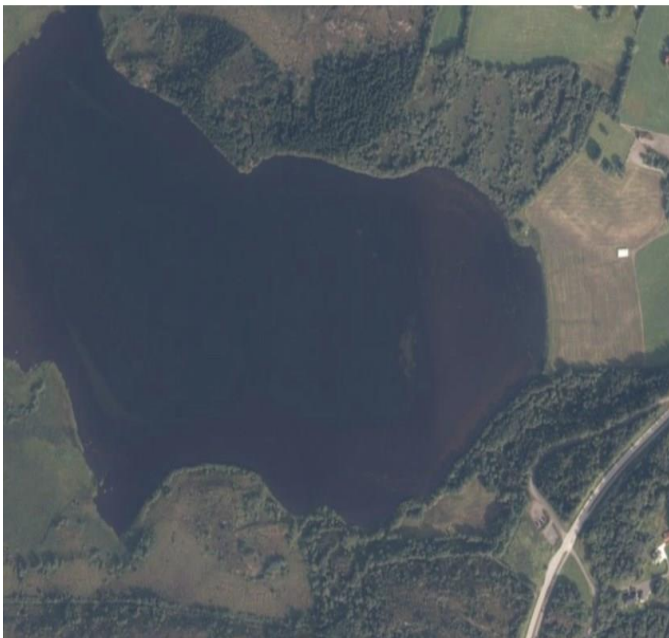
Bird surveys in Sandblåst- / Gaustadvågen have been carried out on several occasions, the most recent in 2023, in relation to a review of the site management plan, for which the County Governor’s Office in Møre og Romsdal has responsibility for. These surveys have revealed major changes in the site’s function for birds in general, and particularly for breeding birds. The population of breeding birds was reduced by 80 % for waders and by 60 % for waterfowl between 1975 and 2009, and with a further reduction of 30 % between 2009 and 2023. There has been an enormous reduction of over 80 % for breeding wetland bird species in the space of 50 years.

Table 1. Development of breeding populations for selected wetland bird species in Sandblåst-/Gaustadvågen Nature Reserve and Ramsar Site, Norway between 1975 and 2023, expressed as number of breeding pairs. Source: Gjeldnes et al. 2024.

Species	1975	2009	2023
Eurasian Curlew	30	5	0-2
Northern Lapwing	50	7	5
Ruff	2	0	0
Common Ringed Plover	4	0	0
Common Redshank	16	5	2
Dunlin	5	0	0
Oystercatcher	15	1	0-1
Mallard	15-20	5	2
Eurasian Teal	5	2	0
Northern Pintail	0-2	0	0
Common Gull	200	0	0

Probable reasons for decline in numbers of breeding birds

In our opinion, changes in the ecological character of the site are the main factors leading to reduced populations of several bird species. Aerial photographs taken in the 1960s compared to photographs taken today, show major changes in and around Sandblåst- / Gaustadvågen during the past 60 years.



Figur 2. The upper photograph shows the eastern part of Gaustadvågen in 1960. Open heathland with some agricultural land dominates the landscape around the site. The lower photograph shows Gaustadvågen in 2023. The extent of agricultural land has not altered, but now there are only a couple of large fields. Above all, successional vegetation in the form of woodland is the major change in the area. There are several photographs showing changes in the attached report (Gjeldnes et al. 2024).

Several bird species such as Eurasian Curlew (endangered – EN – on the national red list) and Northern Lapwing (critically endangered – CR) have exhibited a decline both regionally and nationally. Large declines in numbers of several other species have also been observed, such as for Common Redshank (near-threatened – NT), Eurasian Oystercatcher (near-threatened – NT), Common Teal and Mallard. In other words, the site's function for breeding birds has been severely degraded. Overgrowing, both adjacent to as well as within the reserve, results in changes in vegetation and changes to suitable foraging and living areas for birds. The most important habitats for wetland birds include saltmarsh, freshwater and saltwater habitats, as well as mires and heathlands. Overgrowing and other landscape changes can also lead to increased presence of predators, and thereby increased predation pressure. A reduction in water salinity may also have negative consequences. Additional negative factors include pollution and sedimentary deposits.

In summary, the main changes are as follows:

- The area of open mudbanks is considerably reduced, both in the western part of Gaustadvågen as well as central parts of Sandblåstvågen.
- The area of wet meadows and saltmarshes in the western part of Gaustadvågen have noticeably increased.
- There are extensive areas of overgrowing and of tree planting around Gaustadvågen, especially in the eastern part.
- Several drainage channels were created in Sandblåstvågen in the 1980s.



Figure 3. View of the saltmarshes in the western part of Gaustadvågen. The amount of saltmarsh has increased considerably during recent decades, and now almost prevents water flow. In particular, there are now concerns about the effects of a reduction in water salinity. Photo: Øyvind Gjeldnes.

The background for these changes in the ecological character of the area are undoubtedly interrelated. It is uncertain as to how these changes interact in reducing the ecological quality of the area. There is a desperate need to carry out more extensive surveys both in and around the reserve, in order to carry out necessary actions to reverse these changes and restore the original environmental qualities that gave rise to the site's current protected status. Restoration work carried out in recent years has in no way compensated for the undesirable developments at this site. In order to be effective, any restoration work needs to be upscaled and needs to be carried out over a long timespan in order to improve the situation.

BirdLife Norway recommend that Sandblåst-/Gaustadvågen Nature Reserve is listed as an Article 3.2 file, and we look forward to this matter being dealt with by the Ramsar Secretariat.

On behalf of BirdLife Norway



Kjetil Aa. Solbakken, Secretary General

Attachement:

Gjeldnes, Ø., Gjeldnes, A. & Gaarder, G. 2024. Fugletaksering i Sandblåst-/Gaustadvågen naturreservat. Resultater av inventeringer i 2023. BirdLife Møre og Romsdal, rapport 2024-3. 30 s. ISBN 978-82-93893-12-7

Copied to:

The County Governor of Møre og Romsdal (Statsforvalteren i Møre og Romsdal)

The Norwegian Environment Agency (Miljødirektoratet)

Ministry of Climate and Environment (Klima- og miljødepartementet)