

Birdlife in Skjern River Delta

After 30 years of intense agricultural use, the Skjern river valley has been turned back into an area dominated by nature. The aim has been for the area to develop into a nature area of international importance. Over a short period, the lowest lying land was turned into lakes, and meadows of varying degrees of wetness. There are good possibilities for observing the birds, from several carparks and the birdwatching towers. Bicycle paths lay in several areas close to the birds.

An all-year presence

Throughout the year, impressive numbers of mute swans, coots, cormorants, grey herons, greylag geese and many species of duck can be seen.

Breeding birds

The first breeding birds of the year are greylag geese and mallards. Later come the shelduck, shoveler, garganey and gadwall. The diving ducks - tufted duck and pochard - breed together with the black-necked grebe under the shelter of the black-headed gull colonies. Great crested grebe are accompanied by the red-necked grebe and little grebe.

One of the area's most exciting breeding birds is the spoonbill, which came to breed in 2002 for the first time. The spoonbill can be observed in the western part of the area especially. A bird which is rarely seen but often heard is the bit-

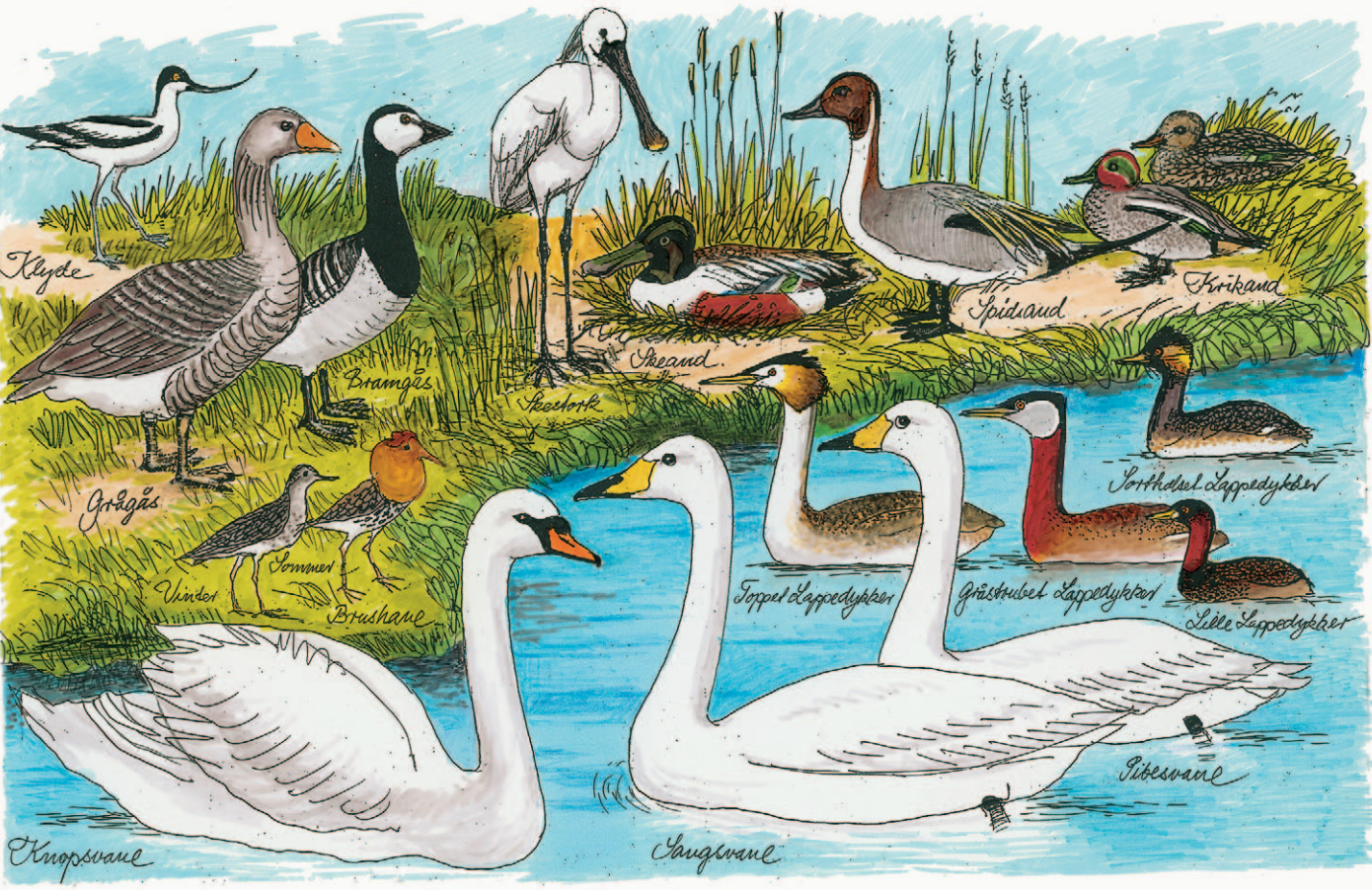
tern- whose song sounds like someone blowing across the top of an empty bottle. The marsh harrier can be seen flying low and hunting for mice and birds over the meadows. The most visible waders are the lapwing, avocet and oystercatcher.

Migratory and winter guests

The migration of migratory birds can be watched in the spring and autumn. The most numerous species are the lapwing, golden plover and dunlin. In the spring you can see hundreds of ruffs, on their way from winter stopovers in Africa to breeding grounds in the north and east. When they leave the breeding grounds, the first already in July, they have lost this fantastic feather display.

In August and September the osprey pays a visit, and during the winter there is a chance of seeing the white-tailed eagle and peregrine falcon in the area. Other birds of prey include the hen harrier, common buzzard, rough-legged buzzard, kestrel, merlin and red kite.

Some of the birds that come to Skjern Meadow in the autumn spend their winter here. The Bewick's swan and whooper swan come from Siberia, Scandinavia and Russia. From Svalbard, Norway and Siberia large flocks of pink-footed geese, greylag and barnacle geese come. Flocks of thousands of teal, widgeon, mallard, pintail duck, shoveller and gadwall leave their breeding grounds in the north and east and come to live on the water here.



Farming and nature

Since ancient times to the 1960s farmers have cut hay for winter fodder in the meadows along the river Skjern and subsequently left the meadows to be grazed by livestock. The river supplied the meadows with fertilizing nutrients until farming began to use artificial fertilizers. The river Skjern flooded its banks several times a year and deposited its nutrients on the meadows. The flooding and depositing of nutrients meant that the water was cleaned, improving water quality and animal life in the river and The Fjord. The wet and flooded meadows were an excellent breeding and nurturing place for a rich plant and animal life, not least for wading and web-footed birds.

Farmers wished to control the flooding in order to improve the use of the meadows. In 1902 the river was redirected to a more northern path through Hestholm (the later Søndre Parallelkanal). However, not until the 1960s when the river was redirected further north, straightened, embanked, pumping stations were built and the area drained did the flooding and farming of the area come under control. Intensive agriculture replaced hay harvesting and grazing. The accumulation of nutrients in the soil was used up and the fields were treated with fertilizer. The river water was not cleaned and large amounts of nutrients and ochre were carried out into the fjord. This resulted in a much, more poor plant and animal life.

In 2000 the intensive farming stopped in connection with the nature project and has been replaced by meadows in the lower part of the river valley - from Borris to Ringkøbing Fjord, in total 2200 ha, of which 1950 ha are owned by the state. The rich plant and animal life of former times is returning to the nature area, thanks to the returning of the river to its former meandering course past Lønborg Banke and the halt of draining. Now the river is again able to flood its meadows. The wet meadows have returned and lakes have formed. A new landscape has been created which is different to the one that existed before the drainage of the 1960s. Livestock grazing and hay harvesting are necessary in order to keep the landscape open and to create the best conditions for the river valley's many birds, especially breeding waders such as redshank and ruffs, and ducks such as pintails, garganey and shovellers. Each summer about 1000 head of livestock are allowed out on the meadows. The Danish Forest and Nature Agency has made grazing agreements for specified periods with a number of farmers. Throughout the summer, a sizeable number of the animals are taken care of by the herdsmen of the State Forest District of Oxbøl.

Welcome to Skjern River Delta

During the period 1987 to 2003, the Danish Forest and Nature Agency has restored the lower part of the Skjern river valley. In the nature area, a rich plant and animal life is protected, and good opportunities have been created for visitors to enjoy exploring the area.

Transport to Skjern River Delta

Public transport takes you by train to Skjern and Tarm. From here you can walk or take the bus to Nørre Nebel. It stops in Lønborg. The nature area's car parks, which are all on the edge of the area, can be reached along many public roads by motor vehicle.

Outdoor activities

A network of paths provide good opportunities for exploring the area on foot, by bicycle and on horseback. The surfaced paths are suitable for the walking impaired, wheelchair users and cyclists. Birds can be observed from paths and hides. **Sailing** without motor is permitted downstream on the River Skjern from 16 June to 28 (29) February from Borris to Ringkøbing Fjord. Permits can be bought for **angling** along certain stretches of the river. An annual **hunting** permit for part of Skjern meadow can be purchased. Simple areas are provided for **overnight stays** and **barbecues**. In several locations there are **notice boards** that provide information about the nature and sights in the area. From 2006 the **nature centers** at Poldene have exhibition about the bird life, cultural history etc. **Nature guidance** is provided through tours that are advertised and tours for groups can be arranged with the State Forest District of Oxbøl.

Important rules

The driving of cars, motorbikes and scooters is not allowed in the nature area. Horse riding is not allowed outside the marked paths. Dogs must be on a lead at all times and may not be taken into a boat, kayak or canoe. Overnight stays in tents and bonfires are not allowed outside the marked areas. Fishing and hunting is not allowed without a valid fishing and hunting permit. Help to keep the area tidy, take your rubbish away with you.



In 2003 Skjern River Delta received a Europa Nostra Award – an award promoting the conservation of European cultural heritage. The nature project is supported by Life Environment and Life Nature.



Skjern River Delta is run by the Danish Forest and Nature Agency and can be contacted locally through the State Forest District of Oxbøl, tel. 76 54 10 20, oxboel@sns.dk, www.skovognatur.dk.

Skjern Enge



This series »Nature trails« comprises pamphlets on selected nature areas. The pamphlets are available at libraries, tourist information offices and at the entrances to many of the areas. See also www.skovognatur.dk

Ministry of the Environment
Danish Forest and Nature Agency

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The Danish Forest and Nature Agency manages
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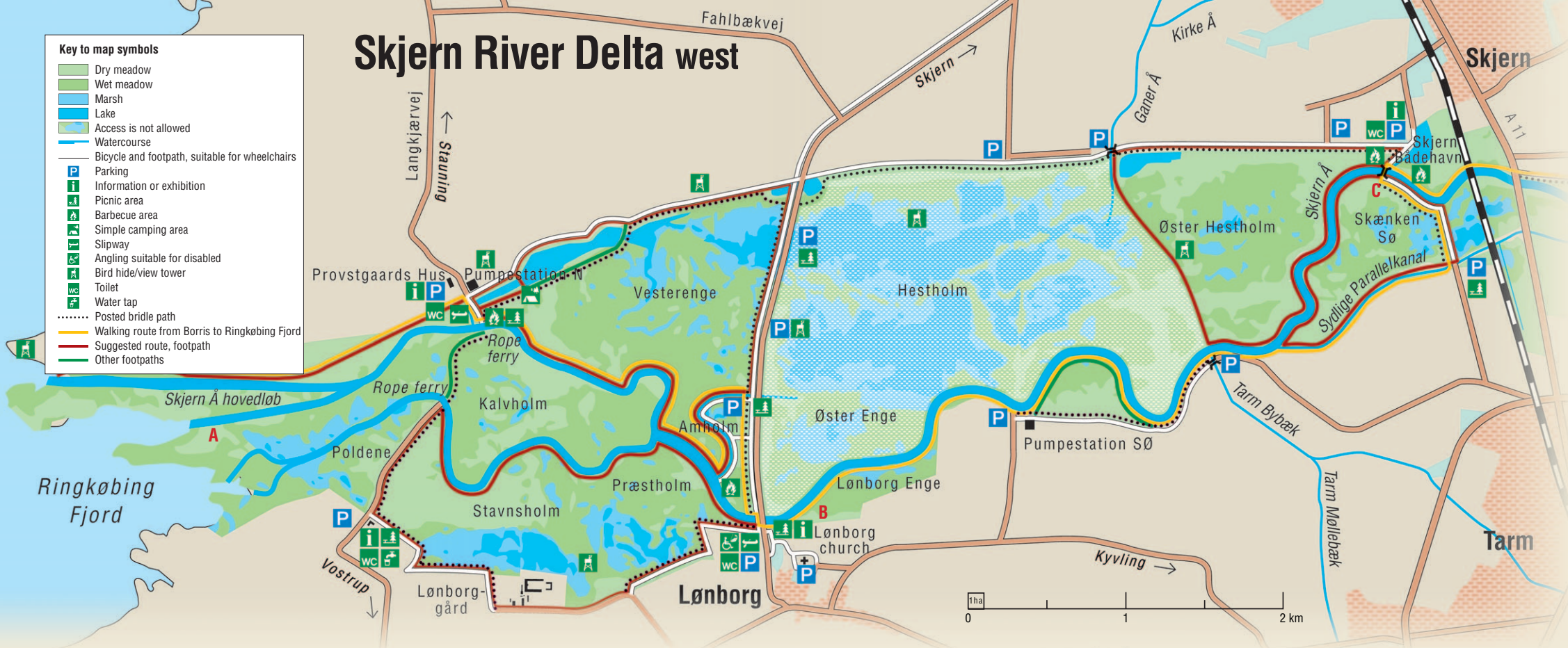


Skjern River Delta
west



Danish Forest and Nature Agency
Nature trails No. 119E





A. Denmark's strongest flowing river and largest delta

After the ice age the fjord reached past Skjern and Tarm, in the iron age it reached up to Lønborg, and 200 years ago up to Pumpestation Nord. The delta has been formed by sand that the river has carried down from its large upland area. The river Skjern delta was an area with rich and diverse animal life. When the lower part of the Skjern river valley was drained in the 1960s, a large part of the delta lies in the nature area. Over the coming years, the sand and clay carried by the river towards the fjord will be deposited in the river, on the meadows and in Ringkøbing Fjord, so once again a system of small distributaries and islets will be created. The delta and the fjord can be accessed from Pumpestation Nord and Poldene.

B. Lønborg Banke

Since ancient times the Skjern river valley has been an attractive site for human settlement because of its good potential for hunting, fishing and farming. At Lønborg Banke signs of human settlement can be traced back to the Iron Age. Productive salmon fishing and cattle farming in the meadow area made both the Crown and Church interested in the area. From about 1100 a royal estate farm and Lønborg Church were to be found here. At that time the mouth of the river was close below Lønborg Banke. The royal estate farm was later moved some hundred metres to the west, but was destroyed in the 1600s. In the 1400s the Bishop of Ribe built the Bishop's Palace – the later Lønborggård. After the reformation it was taken over by the Crown, which later sold the Bishop's estate together with the royal estate farm as private property.

C. Crossings over the river Skjern

In former times it was difficult to traverse the river and its wetlands. There were important fords below Lønborg church and south of the town of Skjern. There has been a bridge close to Skjern Vad since the beginning of the 1100s. Traveling over the river could still be unsafe, which is illustrated by the story about King Hans (Kong Hans) who in the winter of 1513 fell from his horse and was soaked through. He became so ill that he died later on his journey. Today the Kong Hans suspension bridge stands where the oldest bridge once stood. In the 1600s the longest bridge in Denmark at that time was built northeast of Kong Hans bridge. Frost fracturing in 1845 destroyed the bridge and a new bridge and road were built to the east, just where the present road lies from Skjern to Tarm. A new road and bridge were built in connection with the draining in the 1960s.

Skjern River Delta has been restored to the benefit of walkers, cyclists and horse riders. From the paths and car parks there are many opportunities to experience the characteristic west Jutland inlet landscape – the broad expanses, the flat floodplains with river, lakes and meadows, which surrounded by hills go out into Ringkøbing Fjord.

From **Amholm car park** a walking trail of about 6 km goes around **Vesterenge** (2 1/2 hours). A path from the north side of the river Ganer's southern channel follows the river to Pumpestation Nord. The path on the dike was originally the northern dike of the once rechannelled river Skjern. Starting at **Pumpestation Nord**, an approx. 1 km long route goes around a small remainder of the river Skjern which is surrounded by the dikes that were built in connection with the draining in the 1960s. The pumping station still operates, since the fields north of the nature area are still drained. A memorial stone about the drainage can be found at the pumping station, and a little to the north lies Probstgaards Hus – an original hunting and fishing hut from around 1920.

From Pumpestation Nord you can walk along the dike to the mouth of the river Skjern in **Ringkøbing Fjord** (about 2 km). A view tower has been placed at the mouth of the river, where this dynamic nature area can be observed creating a new landscape.

The **rope ferry** allows you get from Pumpestation Nord to Poldene by crossing the watercourses.

There is a 7 km walking route around **Præstholm** and **Stavnsholm** (3 hours). The route passes the point where the river Skjern splits. The main river runs to the north past Pumpestation Nord. The route also passes the former manor house Lønborggård. The State bought the manor house and its 320-ha grounds in connection with the River Skjern Nature Restoration Project. The low-lying ground is now part of the nature area, whilst the higher farmland has been allocated to the surrounding farms. Today the buildings are privately owned. A nature centre with exhibitions etc. lays close to Poldene.

5 km route around **Øster Hestholm** (2 hours). There is a fine view of Hestholm lake from the birdwatching tower between Hestholm and Øster Hestholm. In former times, there were also lakes here, which were gradually filled with fine river material – growing over with bog moss and turning into meadow. The draining of the 1960s allowed the nutrient-rich land to be used as farmland. Now the lakes have returned, but with time they will again be filled in, overgrow and turn into meadows.

Route around **Skænken lake**, about 3 km (1 hour). The rare plant floating water-plantain can be seen in July from the bridge crossing Sydlige Parallelkanal.

Surfaced paths for the walking impaired and wheelchair users
A surfaced path for wheelchair users has been laid from the Amholm car park

(1-1.5 km). The path follows the eastern bank of the river Ganer up to where it joins the river Skjern, and returns along the cycle path along the road Skjern-åvej. All surfaced paths along the north and south side of the nature area are well suited for the walking impaired and wheelchair users. There is a surfaced path from the car park by Lønborg Church that runs along the west side of the cemetery dike up to the view point at the top of the bank. The path from Skænken Lake to Kong Hans Bridge and Skjern Bådehavn are also suitable.

A complete walking route along Skjern river **from Borris to Ringkøbing Fjord** is about 30 km long.

A habitat for rare plants and animals

Skjern river delta have been selected as a European nature protection area – a so-called Natura 2000 area. The aim of the areas is to maintain and protect biological diversity nationally and across Europe. The basis for the selection of Skjern river and meadow is the fact that the threatened floating water-plantain, Skjern river salmon and otter live here.



The extremely rare floating water-plantain grows in some of Skjern river valley's watercourses. It flowers in July and August with carpets of white flowers and characteristic elliptical floating leaves. In Denmark floating water-plantain (Luronium natans) grows only in a small area of western Jutland. It grows in nutrient rich channels where weed cutting holds competing plants back. Maintaining floating water-plantain requires a certain amount of work.

The Skjern river salmon, which the river is famous for, was on the brink of extinction due to bad water quality, straightening of watercourses, barriers, and destruction of spawning grounds. Since ancient times, this salmon population has returned for spawning, after 1 – 4 years in the Atlantic Ocean. One reason that it is still found is due to propagation and release of salmon fry from female fish. The recent years' improvement of Skjern river with meanders and new spawning grounds appears to have caused a rise in the salmon population, but artificial propagation will be needed for a number of years.



Ringkøbing Fjord and Skjern river valley have been a key habitat for the Danish otter. After draining of the delta in the 1960s, otter numbers fell quickly and it risked disappearing. The nature area's meandering watercourses, wet meadows and lakes will improve the conditions for the otter and cause numbers to increase.

