

Location



Introduction

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is a country in the northwest of Europe with its coastline in the North Sea, bordered by Germany to the east and Belgium to the south. It is a low-lying country with 451km of coastline, with a temperate marine climate, with cool summers and mild, wet winters.

The Netherlands has historically reclaimed land from the sea and lakes by creating polders. These are areas that have been closed off from the main water body using dikes and often requiring pumping of water to maintain them. As a result of this process, much of these polders are below sea level.

The Netherlands coastline and maritime waters are a particularly busy area for maritime traffic as it is along the route between the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic, as well as being an entry point for the River Rhine. The Port of Rotterdam is also Europe's biggest and busiest port on the continent. This means that The Netherlands can be subject to shipping incidents.

Regional Seas and Biogeography

North Sea (LME)

Habitats

- Sea Grasses can be found in patches along the Dutch coast, with the largest patches found in the Wadden Sea in the north.
- Coastal wetlands and salt marshes can be found at different locations around the Dutch coast, but the most prominent are found in the north as part of the Wadden Sea conservation area. The next largest area is in the south along the coast in the Southwest Delta where the Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt rivers meet the sea.
- Tidal flats are mostly found in the northern coast in Friesland and Groningen, and around the Wadden Islands.
- Sand flats can be found around the coast of the Netherlands, with the largest continuous area found in the Wadden Sea in the north. The next most significant area of sand flats is in the Western Scheldt estuary in the southwest.
- Dune systems are an important habitat found extensively along the Dutch coast and on the West Frisian Islands. These systems are subject to strong tidal influences.
- Salt marshes are mainly found in the Wadden Sea Coastal areas in the north, with some also found in the southwest Delta Area.

Biodiversity Hotspots

→ Ramsar sites

Wadden Sea National Park (more below) contains 5 Ramsar sites that are coastal dunes. It also contains another Ramsar Site of coastal shallow waters with sandbanks, mudflats, salt meadows and embryonic shifting dunes. The National Park and the relevant species are detailed below.

Zwanenwater en Pettemerduinen, also a Natura 2000 site, is a coastal wetland south of the Wadden Sea National Park dominated by humid dune-slacks, marshes, woodland and two connected freshwater lakes. The site is important for many waterbirds, especially lesser white-fronted goose and Eurasian bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*).

Voornes Duin, also a Natura 2000 site, is a dune system in the south on the coast near Rotterdam. The area also has two lakes and dune slacks surrounded by woodland and wet dune valleys. The site is an important breeding area for the Eurasian spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) and great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*).

Haringvliet, also a Natura 2000 site, is a closed inlet that is part of the Delta in the south of the country with a tidal system controlled by locks. The landscape consists of grass buntings, reed and rush fields, vegetated and bare sand and mud flats bordering the open water. It is an important area for wintering waterbirds such as Eurasian spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) and sandwich tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*).

Grevelingen, also a Natura 2000 site, is an intertidal area and saline lake bordered by dikes in the south of The Netherlands. There are also some dunes and wet meadows. It is an important area for waterbirds with numbers reaching around 67,000 at their peak. Species include Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*), great cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) among other waterbirds.

Voordelta, a Natura 2000 Site, SPA and SAC, is an area of shallow coastal waters, intertidal areas, dunes, estuaries and some salt marshes found in the southern coast. It covers the shallow sea part of the Zeeland and South Holland Delta. The site is particularly important as a resting area for seals, and as a foraging and resting area for several species of water birds such as grebes, divers and sea-ducks. It is also an important resting area for bird migration in Autumn and Spring. Regarding mammals, the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) are also frequently found here, as well as the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*).

Veerse Meer, a Natura 2000 Site, SPA and SAC, in the southern coastline on the Walcheren peninsula. It is a brackish lake with over 2000 ha of submerged salt marshes which happened after the construction of the Veerse Dam. The site is particularly important for waterbirds, such as Eurasian wigeon (*Anas penelope*), Brent Goose (*Branta leucopsis*), Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*), and many more.

Westerschelde and Saefthinghe, a Natura 2000 site, SPA and SAC, covers the entire estuary of the River Schelde which runs along the border of The Netherlands and Belgium. It consists of extensive mudflats and sandbanks, and it is the entrance point for ships to the port of Antwerp, the second largest port in Europe. The area is subject to large tidal zones, and has sandbanks, mudflats, salt marshes and dunes.

→ National Parks and ecological reserves

Wadden Sea National Park is a transboundary system of large intertidal sand and mud flats that spans along the Dutch, German and Danish coastlines and is a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The Park is a crucial stop off point for migratory birds along the East Atlantic migration route and an important breeding site. At times birds are numbering in the millions, especially waders, geese, ducks and gulls. Example species are Eurasian spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*), Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) and Red knot (*Calidris canutus*), but there are many more species who could be at risk during an oil spill.

Seals can be found in large numbers. Harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) use the sand banks for resting and pupping. Grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) also rest and breed in the Dutch Wadden Sea.

→ IBAs

Lake IJsselmeer is a shallow freshwater lake that has been cut off from the Wadden Sea along the Frisian coast. It is an important migratory resting point along the East Atlantic Flyway for many birds, especially waterbirds such as the common pochard, tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*), Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), Cormorant (*Corvus marinus*), amongst others.

Hollandse Kust, also covering a Ramsar Convention Site, stretches from Northern holland to the Port of Rotterdam along the coast. It has more than 20,000 Great Crested Grebes during winter, and is known to have high numbers of Red-throated Divers (*Gavia stellata*), other ducks and terns.

Delta Coast, also a KBA, runs from the port of Rotterdam to the Western Schelde estuary. It has a high number of bird species, notably the endangered velvet scoter and horned grebe. There are also more common birds at the site such as Kentish plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), northern pintail (*Anas acuta*), amongst others.

Westerschelde & Saefthinghe is a tidal estuary that is on the border of Belgium and the Netherlands which encompasses the entry point of the sea to the port of Antwerp (Belgium). It has mudflats and sandbanks with species such as the grey plover, Eurasian curlew (*Numenius Arquata*) and bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*).

At risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (VU), Endangered (EN) or Critically Endangered (CR). A more complete list of IUCN listed species is found in Appendix 1.

➔ **At risk birds**

Throughout the Netherlands, waders, geese, ducks, gulls, and terns can be found along the coast, all of which could be at risk during an oil spill. The coastal zones are also crucial stop off points for many migratory birds in spring and winter.

In particular, the northern coastal areas such as the Frisian islands and the Wadden Sea could produce thousands of oiled birds if there was an incident. They are also along a busy shipping route, increasing risks

➔ **At risk reptiles**

Marine reptiles are not known to be in Dutch marine waters.

➔ **At risk mammals**

Harbour seals and grey seals can be found along the Dutch coast, with the most significant numbers being in the Wadden Sea and the Delta region. With such high numbers, and with both species pupping in the Dutch coastal areas, an oil spill reaching the coast could cause a significant number of oiled seals, particularly in the northern areas along the busy shipping route. The harbour porpoise, although not endangered globally, is the most common cetacean in Dutch waters and is endangered locally.

Past experience with oil spill and potential risks

The Netherlands is on a busy shipping route which exposes the Dutch coastline to oil spills and other such maritime incidents which are detailed below.

Oiled wildlife incident (October 2025) occurred when a mystery spill caused around 120 oiled birds washed up in Texel, Ameland, Terschelling and Schiermonnikoog, as well as along the coast of North and South Holland. The spill came from an unknown source. Initially the birds found in the north, were taken to De Fûgelhelling rehab centre. In the south, all birds were taken to Vogelasiel De Wulp in The Hague and Vogelhospitaal in Haarlem. However, as numbers increased over time, De Fûgelhelling became the main centre for rehabilitation in the north. Son Respons kept authorities informed, such as Rijkswaterstaat, with the response being in line with the SBV scaling 1 (more below). The birds were washed by experts who were trained under the EUOWA standards and subsequently released from the main centre.

MSC Zoe Incident (2019) was a container ship that got caught in bad weather and lost over 300 containers overboard near the Dutch Wadden Islands. The containers lost had a range of items inside, such as plastics, tyres, electronics and more which were washed onto the coastline mainly in the Frisian islands, but also in the German coastlines of the Wadden Sea. A large-scale beach cleanup effort was initiated and coordinated by Rijkswaterstaat, local municipalities, NGOs and hundreds of volunteers with debris washing up for months afterwards. Despite not being an oil spill, the incident had similar stakeholders and efforts to clean the coastline as if there were an oil spill.

The Bow Jubail incident (2018) was a significant oiled wildlife incident which activated the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan, Tier-2 and Tier-3 wildlife response through the EUOWA and GOWRS Networks. An incident occurred when a ship collided with a jetty, spilling over 200 tonnes of heavy fuel oil resulting in the oiling of over 500 swans. The spill occurred in June, on a warm summers day which meant that the public quickly observed the oiled swans. While the Port of Rotterdam did not have a specific plan for oiled wildlife, Rijkswaterstaat had a plan which was used for the wildlife response. The original plan included the setup of a Temporary Wildlife Hospital which had been practised in an exercise months beforehand by Rijkswaterstaat, although in a different location. During the first days of the response, oiled swans were brought to local wildlife centres, while a temporary wildlife hospital was being setup in coordination with Rijkswaterstaat, Son Respons, Sea Alarm, and European and international experts. Once the temporary centre was running, all oiled birds were transferred there. The wildlife response was an overall success, with 511 swans being rehabilitated and released back into the wild.

The Tricolor incident (2003) was a significant oiled wildlife incident along the French, Belgian and Dutch coastlines where a car carrier sunk off the coast of France and subsequently 48 hours later another ship, the Nicola, crashed into the wreck. Two weeks later, another ship crashed into the wreck leading to further loss of cargo. Although only a relatively small amount of oil was spilled, a very high number of birds quickly became oiled due to the location of the spill and the time of the year. Around 4000 oiled birds washed up on the Dutch coastline and the vast majority either died or were euthanised.

International and Regional Treaties and Agreements

→ Oil spill and HNS Response

- d CLC Convention 69
- CLC Protocol 76
- CLC Protocol 92
- FUND Protocol 76
- FUND Protocol 92
- FUND Protocol 2003
- d LLMC Convention 76
- LLMC Protocol 96
- OPRC Convention 90
- HNS Convention 96
- HNS PROT 2010
- OPRC HNS 2000
- BUNKERS CONVENTION 01

→ Marine Biodiversity Protection

- Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS)
- Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA)
- Cartagena Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment in the Wider Caribbean Region
- The Protocol Concerning Co-operation and Development in Combating Oil Spills in the Wider Caribbean Region (the Oil Spills Protocol)
- Bonn Agreement for Cooperation in dealing with pollution of the North Sea by oil and other harmful substances

Oil Spill Response and HNS Spill Response

→ National Contingency Plan?

Netherlands has a national oil spill contingency plan with which includes wildlife. There is a long-standing inclusion of oiled wildlife in the national oil spill contingency plan, which was last updated in 2020.

→ Role of Competent National Authorities

Rijkswaterstaat has the overall responsibility for oiled wildlife response nationally and has a dedicated cooperation agreement with Son-Respons to improve oiled wildlife preparedness and to be activated if needed. Son-Respons coordinates, acting as an umbrella organisation, a network of wildlife rehabilitation centres when dealing with oiled wildlife, and represents and engages relevant stakeholders for oiled wildlife planning and preparedness. Son-Respons is a member of the EUROWA Network, and has organised numerous training courses at all EUROWA levels, from Basic Responder courses to Specialist and Management courses (More below). Son-Respons also has a close working relationship with Sea Alarm for assistance with oiled wildlife preparedness and response. Son-Respons and Sea Alarm work closely with Rijkswaterstaat to improve preparedness in line with the multi-year programme agreement for oiled wildlife between the organisations.

The oiled wildlife response plan (known as SBV) has two scaling levels. Level 1 refers to an incident where local NGOs can manage the number of birds arriving, coordinated by Son Respons who also keeps Rijkswaterstaat informed. Scaling level 2 is when capacity goes beyond that and Rijkswaterstaat takes responsibility for setting up a temporary wildlife hospital.

Oiled Wildlife Preparedness and Response

→ Formal guidelines?

The formal guidelines in the Netherlands are to integrate oiled wildlife response into the overall oil spill response. When possible, animals would be rehabilitated under the oiled wildlife response plan, but euthanasia is also an option if deemed necessary. Maintaining animal welfare is at the core of the wildlife response.

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→ **Response objectives and strategy**

The overall response objectives aim to protect the environment and society from spill impacts. Regarding oiled wildlife, maintaining animal welfare is a fundamental aim.

→ **Euthanasia or rehabilitation?**

The overarching aim is to prevent suffering of animals. Rehabilitation is performed when possible and feasible, with trained professionals and volunteers. Many of these people have been trained under the EUROWA standards and best practices. Euthanasia is considered if needed.

→ **Impact assessment**

Rijkswaterstaat would coordinate an impact assessment. Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ) is an internationally renowned scientific body that plays an important role in monitoring the effects of oil spills on marine ecosystems and affected species such as seals and birds and has done much research on the issue. They are formally recognized as the party to do impact assessments in the SBV.

→ **Notification and early response**

Rijkswaterstaat is the first point of contact for notification who would then notify the other relevant stakeholders. Regarding a situation where oiled birds are brought to a rescue centre, this will be reported to the Coastguard Centre and SON-Respons. SON-Respons will pass on the report to Rijkswaterstaat. Son-Respons can be officially activated by Rijkswaterstaat, in line with the ongoing Cooperation Agreement (also known as the SBV). Son-Respons is responsible for alerting and coordinating with the rehabilitation centres in the event of an incident of all scaling levels. They also play a role in coordination and information sharing with other stakeholders, such as NIOZ and the Coast Guard.

→ **Wildlife responders**

Son-Respons has a formal network of wildlife rehabilitation centres with over 500 wildlife responders trained under the EUROWA standard trainings. There are responders trained at all levels, with a number of people in the wildlife centres trained to Specialist and Manager level through EUROWA training programme based on best practices, as well as many Basic and Advanced responders. The Netherlands is the country with the highest number of trained oiled wildlife responders under the EUROWA standards. An important reason for this is the Cooperation Agreement with Rijkswaterstaat which provides financial support for oiled wildlife preparedness.

Son-Respons and Sea Alarm have a multi-year programme with Rijkswaterstaat to facilitate the preparedness for oiled wildlife incidents, and to facilitate coordination between NGOs, the wildlife centre, the authorities and other relevant stakeholders.

A marine mammal response is not part of the SBV. However, there are seal rehabilitation centres that could respond to seals, such as Ecomare Texel.

→ **Cooperation between stakeholders**

The Netherlands is a contracting party to the Bonn Agreement and is also part of an agreement for the Joint Nautical Management in the Scheldt Region with Belgium to ensure safe navigation in the Western Scheldt, which is a busy maritime traffic area as the entrance to the Port of Antwerp (in Belgium).

During the Bow Jubail incident, both EUROWA and the Global Oiled Wildlife Response Service (GOWRS) were activated as part of a Tier-2 and Tier-3 response. Through Son-Respons and EUROWA, there is a collegial relationship with GOWRS for cooperation if an incident overwhelms Tier-1 and Tier-2 resources.

Rijkswaterstaat continues its' multi-year programme with Son Respons and Sea Alarm.

→ Permanent facilities

Within the Son-Respons Network, there are 9 wildlife rehabilitation centres who have also signed up to the EUROWA Standards. These centres are committed to oiled wildlife best practices and have personnel who have taken EUROWA training courses from Basic to Specialist levels. There are also centres in The Netherlands outside the Son-Respons network who have an informal relationship with the network but could be considered for a wildlife response.

→ Current processes

Since 2017 there is an ongoing contract for cooperation agreement between Sea Alarm and Rijkswaterstaat. There are plans for an exercise with a temporary wildlife hospital to be done in 2026.

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Appendix 1

→ At risk birds

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

lesser white-fronted goose / *Anser erythropus* / VU / Resident / Breeding
Long-tailed duck / *Clangula hyemalis* / VU / Migratory in winter / non-breeding
Velvet Scoter / *Melanitta fusca* / VU / Migratory in winter / non-breeding
Common pochard / *Aythya ferina* / VU / Resident / breeding
Horned Grebe / *Podiceps auritus* / VU / Migratory in winter / non-breeding
Grey Plover / *Pluvialis squatarola* / VU / Migratory in winter / non-breeding
Broad-billed Sandpiper / *Calidris falcinellus* / VU / Migratory in Autumn / Non-breeding
Curlew Sandpiper / *Calidris ferruginea* / VU / Migratory in Autumn / non-breeding
Black legged kittiwake / *Rissa tridactyla* / VU / Migratory in Autumn / non-breeding
Aquatic warbler / *Acrocephalus paludicola* / VU / Migratory / non-breeding

→ At risk reptiles

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

→ At risk mammals

Common name / Latin name / IUCN Red List Category (CR,EN,VU) / Resident-Migratory (season) / Breeding-Nesting-Pupping (season)

Fin whale / *Balaenoptera physalus* / VU / Rare visitor / non-breeding
Harbour porpoise / *Phocoena phocoena* / VU subpopulation / resident / breeding