

EXMINSTER-MATFORD-POWDERHAM MARSHES

2017-2026: Confirmed Priority Site of National Importance

Extensive coastal grazing marsh adjacent to Exeter Canal and the upper Exe Estuary. Holds the best population of Hairy Dragonfly in Devon, breeding widely across the whole of the ditch systems, and part of the best population of Scarce Chaser in Devon. Red-eyed Damselfly possibly breeding; Ruddy Darter has bred. Presence of White-legged Damselfly (from Exeter Canal/River Exe?) and Norfolk Hawker.

Last updated: 29/03/2025

Site: EXMINSTER MARSHES	1987-1996			1997-2006			2007-2016			2017-2026		
Grid ref.: SX960875	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other
	Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss	
<u>Damselflies</u>												
Beautiful Demoiselle			A			B			A			B
Banded Demoiselle			C			E			C			C
Emerald Damselfly									A			A
White-legged Damselfly						D			B			A
Large Red Damselfly	C	B	D	C	C	D	A		D	C	B	D
Blue-tailed Damselfly	C	D	E	C	D	E	B	D	E	A	B	E
Scarce Blue-t Damselfly												
Common Blue Damselfly			A		E	F			B		C	C
Southern Damselfly												
Azure Damselfly	D	D	E	D	E	E	C	C	E	D	D	F
Red-eyed Damselfly						C		A	C			B
Small Red-eyed Damselfly									B		A	C
Small Red Damselfly												
<u>Dragonflies</u>												
Hairy Dragonfly	A	A	C	A	C	D	B	B	D			C
Common Hawker												
Norfolk Hawker												A
Brown Hawker												
Southern Hawker			A			C			B	A		B
Migrant Hawker			C	A	B	D			C	A	A	C
Emperor Dragonfly	A	A	C	B	A	D		B	C		B	C
Lesser Emperor						A						
Vagrant Emperor												
Golden-ringed Dragonfly			A			B			A			B
Downy Emerald												
Broad-bodied Chaser	A		A	A		B	A	A	C	A		B
Scarce Chaser							A	A	C	B	C	D
Four-spotted Chaser			A			B			C	A	A	C
Keeled Skimmer												
Black-tailed Skimmer	A	A	D	B	B	D			B		B	C
Common Darter			C	D	C	D			C	B	B	D
Red-veined Darter						B						A
Ruddy Darter	A		A			C			B			
Black Darter												
Yellow-winged Darter												
Scarlet Darter												
Total species in category:	8	6	16	10	9	20	6	7	21	9	11	22

Bold underlined = nationally important species **Bold black** = important species

Succ = Successful breeding (exuvia(e) and/or larva(e) and/or pre-flight emergent and/or oviposition);

Poss = Possible breeding (copulating pair); Other = Adult(s) or unspecified.

Abundance codes: A=1; B=2-5; C=6-20; D=21-100; E=101-500; F=>500; + = no count.

Priority Species History

White-legged Damselfly – D (21-100) were seen at Matford Marshes on 13/6/05. Singles reported at Exminster Marshes on 18/5/98, 18/6/12 and 6/7/19.

Red-eyed Damselfly – 3 were seen at the lagoon in 2003 and 2005 and C (6-20) in 2006. Thence noted most years on the marshes more generally, with 20 on 10/6/08; copulation noted in 2010 and 2014.

Hairy Dragonfly – noted widely over the marsh ditch system, from north of M5 to Powderham (at SX 972845) in the south. A larva was recorded in 1981. 12 (1 pair in cop., 1 egg-laying) on 26/5/92. 19 territorial males noted during 2/6/95-28/6/95 (a poor spring for this early species), including 9 at Matford Marshes and 8 at Powderham Marshes. 1 egg-laying in 1998. 2 larvae were found on 30/8/99 and an exuvia on 8/5/03. About 66 territories were recorded in 2005 across the whole of the marshes, although none was found in the southern section towards Powderham. 24 on 6/6/06. Over 60 were counted in 2007, but no systematic surveys since; maxima of 10 in 2007, 17 in 2011.

Norfolk Hawker – the first record for Devon was a territorial male between Station Road and M5 around SX953880 on 12-13/7/18.

Scarce Chaser – a male was found on the main drain (at SX9539388011) flowing SSE from M5 on 29/5/07, with 4 males and a female/immature on 4/6/07 and 6 males (3 of which had 'mating scars') on 10/6/07. In 2008, up to 2 males were present on in June in the same area, but none was reported in 2009. However, a total of 18 (1 female) were located within a radius of a few hundred metres of this area on 22-23/6/10 and 10 along the same drain, including a female ovipositing, on 26/6/10. Up to 7 noted during 2011-14, increasing to 46 (43 males and 1 pair in cop.) on 11/6/18, possibly over 100 on 7/7/19, 66 (58 males, 1 emergent and 6 pairs in cop.) on 31/5/20 and 92 (88 males, 4 pairs in cop.) on 13/6/23. The main area used is the main drain north and south of SX95358807, together with side drains; in 2023, individuals extended to Exeter Canal (where further individuals occur) and some were detected more widely across the marshes (most of which cannot be accessed).

Ruddy Darter – 1 male on 15/9/94; a larva was identified on 22/5/96; up to 7 were seen during 22/7/02- 7/8/02, with 1 on 2/9/02 and 4/10/02; 1 male was seen on 23/8/04 and 2 on 6 and 13/8/07. At least 1 individual was seen on 23/10/13.

Other species of note:

Lesser Emperor – one male seen on 16 June 2006.

Red-veined Darter – 2 were at the lagoon on 3 and 8/8/05; 1 reported on 16/5/23.

[Records of Variable Damselfly on 1/6/05; single Common Hawkers on 2/9/96 and 30/6/08, and 8 on 28/7/92; and Keeled Skimmer on 16/8/16 cannot be verified. The first species has never been confirmed in Devon.]

Habitat (from 2005-6 survey)

Extensive lowland grazing marshes on the west bank of the Exeter Canal-Exe Estuary stretching from Powderham Church in the south to Bridge Road (Countess Wear) in the north and the A379 and break of slope to the west. Water from the Exeter Flood Alleviation Channel at Countess Wear is directed onto the marshes, causing regular flooding. The site is mainly improved or poor semi-improved grassland, with some arable, separated by ditches acting as wet fences. Grassland is used for grazing and/or silage/hay-making. There are some lengths of scrubby hedgerows. The ditches have a range of width, depth, profile and amount of emergent, floating and submerged vegetation. Water quality is variable. pH (southern part only): mostly 7.8-8.7 (29/8/95). Conductivity: 380->1990 μ S/cm (above detection limit), highest levels in northern half of site, lowest west of railway (late May-June). Within the RSPB reserve, a large lagoon has been dug (since 1995) and several smaller pools, scrapes and seasonally damp areas created. A pond had also been dug at Matford Marshes prior to 2005, adjacent to the canal and opposite Countess Wear sewage works: it is shallow (15cm) with abundant submerged vegetation, frequent to locally abundant emergents and rare floating vegetation.

Floating Water-pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) has been a problem in ditches since about 2000, especially in those between the Lion's Rest and the M5. This infestation has resulted in many ditches being dug out up to 6 times annually to try and eradicate it, but by 2005 specific plants were being removed rather than wholesale ditch clearance.

Status

Mostly SSSI; SPA; RAMSAR; part RSPB Reserve.

Area

ca. 400 ha

Local Authority: Teignbridge DC

Owner/tenant

Various, including RSPB.

Threats

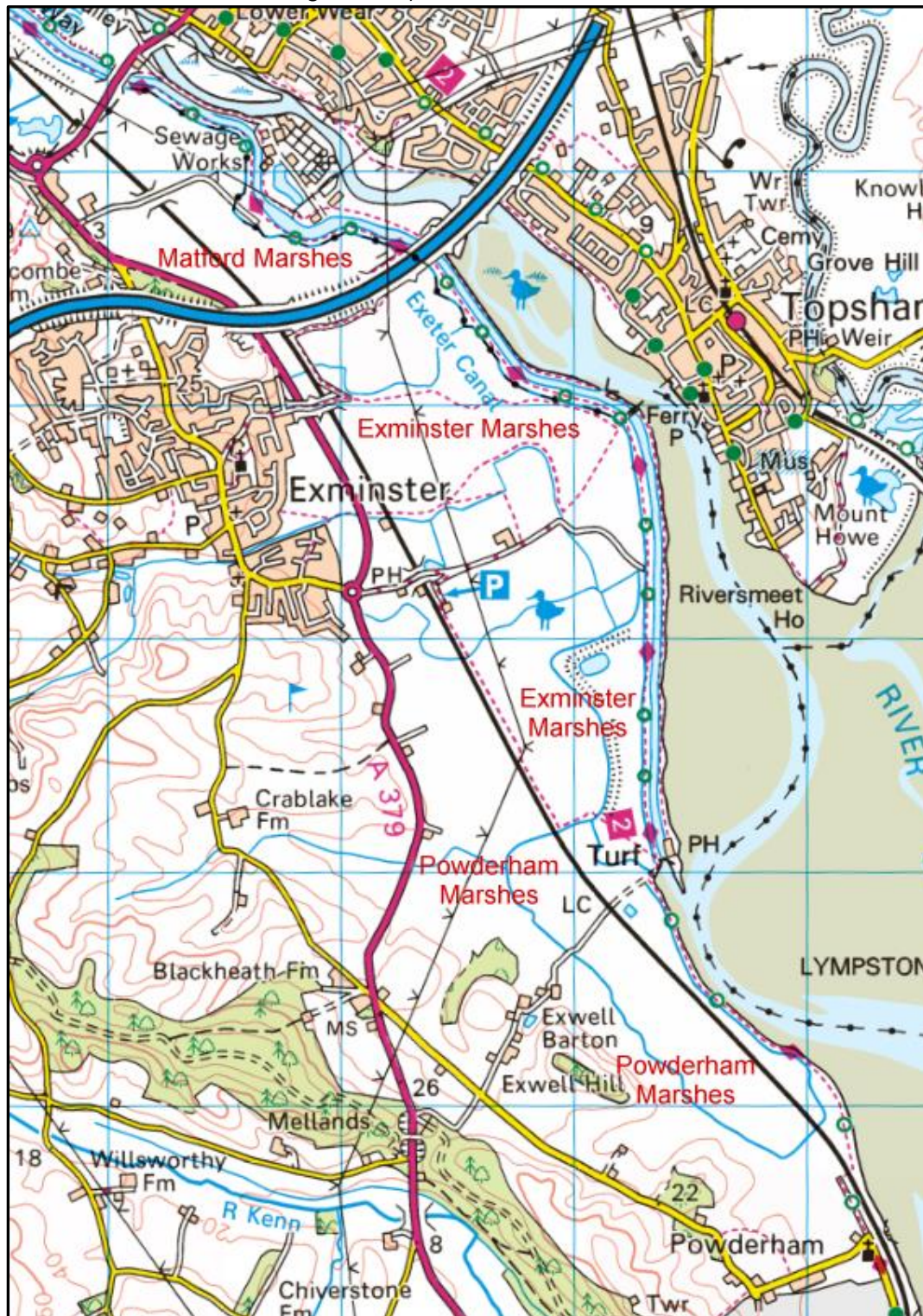
- Decreasing water table.
- Short ditch-maintenance cycle.
- Loss of emergent and bankside vegetation.

Management suggestions

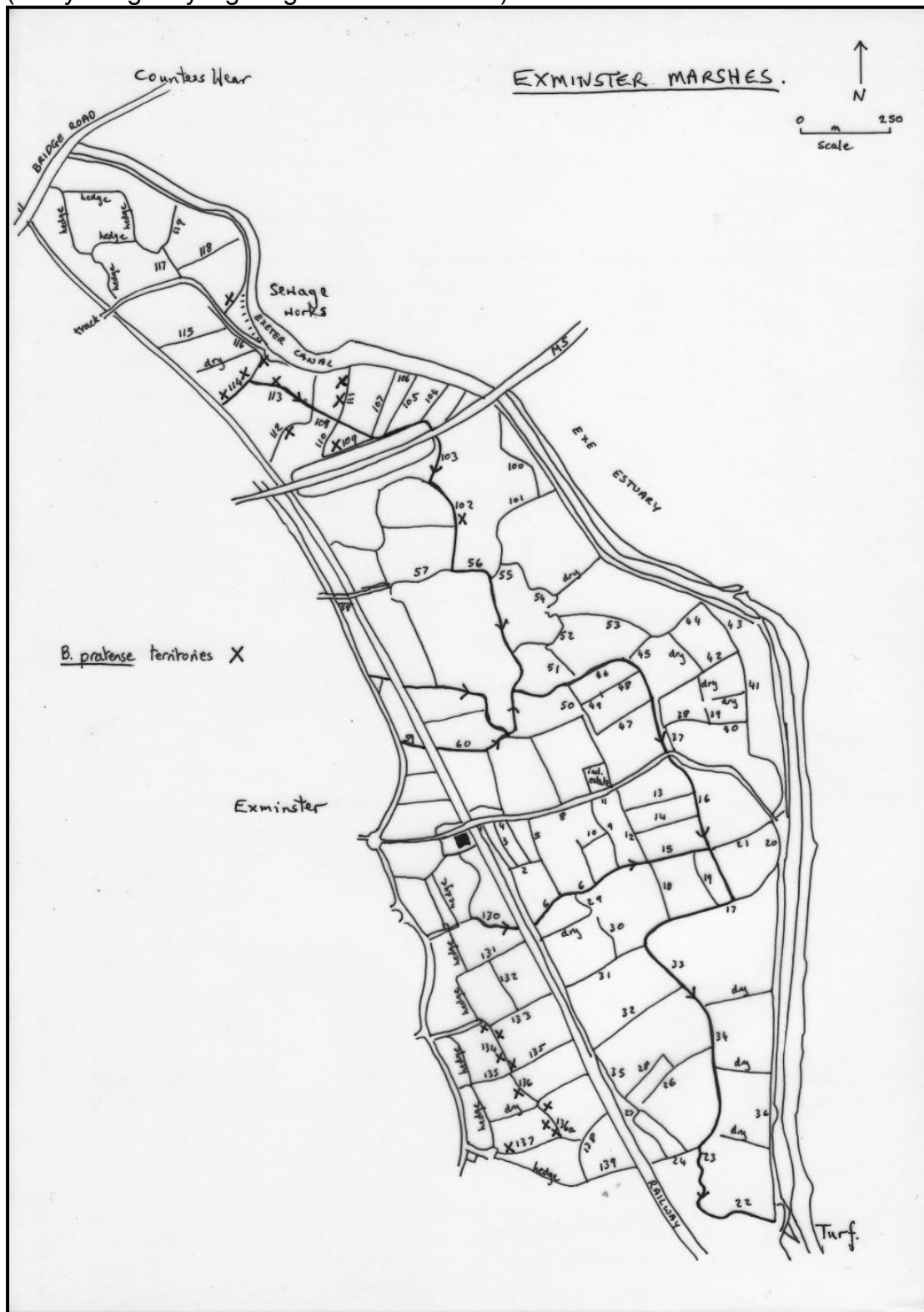
- Maintain or increase water level in ditches.
- Ensure relatively long ditch maintenance cycle (>3 years?).
- Avoid removal of most of the emergent vegetation in main drain favoured by adult Scarce Chasers, which is presumed to be the breeding site.
- Retain some bankside cover for adult dragonflies to rest in.

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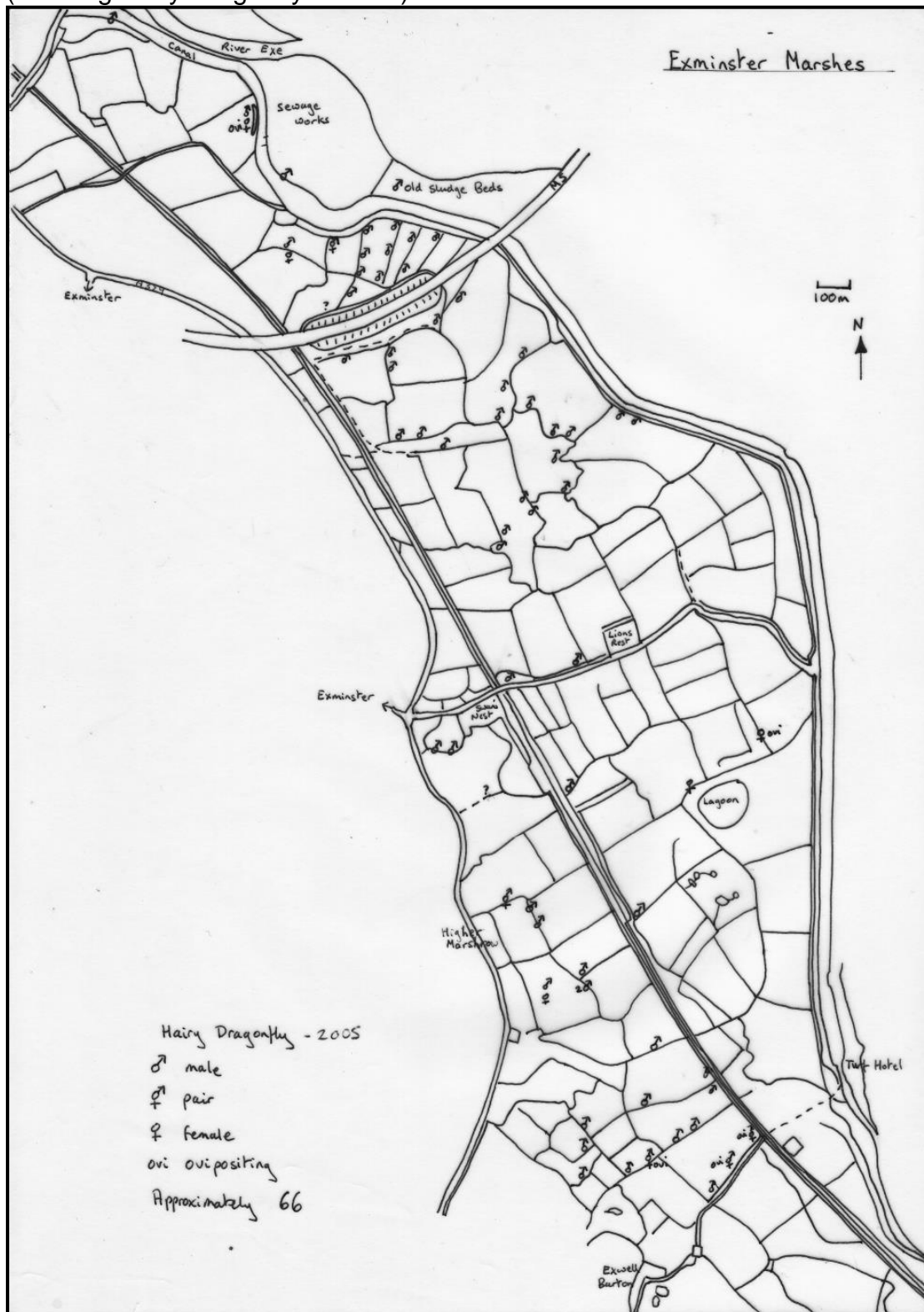
(NB given the impenetrable barrier created by the M5 embankment and viaduct, the grazing marsh to the north is referred to as 'Matford Marsh' – not to be confused with the RSPB Reserve north-west of Bridge Road.)



Exminster-Matford-Powderham Marshes: 1995 survey map
 (Hairy Dragonfly sightings marked with 'X')



Exminster-Matford-Powderham Marshes: 2005 survey map
(showing Hairy Dragonfly records)



RSPB transects on Exminster (top) and Powderham (below) Marshes

