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### **Wildfowl refuge saved by appeal decision Secretary of State backs English Nature**

A wildlife haven for birds - part of Britain's biggest wetland - has been saved as a safe refuge, thanks to today's landmark decision by the Secretary of State for the Environment backing wildlife watchdog English Nature.

Westhay Heath Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), part of the Somerset Levels and Moors, has been protected since July 1990 creating a quiet and peaceful place for wintering birds like gadwall, wigeon and tufted duck to feed and roost. The marsh grassland, ditches and woodlands also provide habitats for otter and rare bittern.

In July 2003 English Nature acted to preserve Westhay Heath SSSI as a safe place for birds to roost by refusing consent for a commercial shoot. When conducted at sustainable levels, wildfowling is compatible with nature conservation. However English Nature had to refuse consent at Westhay because of the disturbance that would be caused by the operation of the shoot, as well as the bird fatalities.

Now Margaret Beckett has backed English Nature's decision to refuse consent for commercial wildfowling and guaranteed the birds can continue to feed and roost there without being disturbed.

Dr Andy Clements, English Nature's Director for Designated sites, said: "We welcome today's decision by the Secretary of State, which backs English Nature's judgement. The decision ensures the continued protection of birds at Westhay Heath SSSI on the Somerset Levels, where birds have had a refuge from wildfowling for many years."

English Nature is already looking to the future. Dr Clements added: "We hope to continue to have a positive working relationship with the owner, to secure mutually agreed long-term management of the site for its internationally important wildlife."