

# Étangs palavasiens //



RAMSAR SITE  
NUMBER  
**1832**



Area :  
**5 800 ha**

Date of designation :  
**September 15<sup>th</sup> 2008**

Coordinates :  
**43 ° 30'N 03 ° 50'E**

## Summary

This lagoon complex of 5,797 ha is composed of a set of seven typically Mediterranean lagoons and peripheral wetlands (marshes, former salt pans, etc.). A lido of 25 km, consisting of sandy beaches and pebbles, separates the lagoons from the sea. The Palavasian ponds are characterized by a great ecological richness, due to the alternation of fresh and salty environments. They constitute a nursery for numerous species of fish and welcome each year a large number of species of laro limicoles. The site also plays a strong economic role through fishing and tourism activities.

## International importance

The Palavasian ponds are recognized as being of international importance for the great diversity of natural habitats that make them up, particularly the coastal lagoon, as well as an important range of animal and plant species, some of which are very rare: Little Tern, Little Bittern, Starry Bittern, Summer Nivéole, Small-flowered Scorzonère, Girard's Saladelle, European Cistude, varied aquatic herbariums, European eel, etc.

## General location

This Ramsar site is located in the south of the Hérault department, between the towns of Sète and Montpellier, along the Mediterranean coast.



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## Services provided by wetlands

These wetlands provide various traditional services such as fishing for fish and shellfish, extensive horse breeding, and viticulture. Hunting, both waterfowl and land game, is also very common. Tourism is also very present, with the development of nature and water sports in parallel with seaside activities, and a growing interest in nature activities and heritage discovery. These areas also play a major role in flood regulation, purification of surface water and expansion of marine intrusions.

## Adverse factors

Tourism, sports and recreation activities put a lot of pressure on the site, with the negative aspects sometimes outweighing the positive ones.

The demographic expansion of the urban centers of Montpellier and Sète increases the impacts on wetlands (habitat fragmentation, diffuse pollution, wastewater discharges, etc.).



## Four species representative of the site



**LITTLE TERN**  
(*Sternula albifrons*)

The little tern, also called sea swallow, is the smallest species of colonial shorebirds. It is especially recognizable by its small size and its yellow beak with black tip. Protected and migratory species, it reaches the French Mediterranean coasts from May to July. It nests in small colonies, often not very dense, on the top of the beaches and the islets of the lagoons, preferably in zones without vegetation.



**GREATER FLAMINGO**  
(*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

The greater flamingo is a coastal bird linked to brackish waters. It lives in lagoons, wetlands and coastal ponds. It owes its name to its plumage which is however largely pinkish white. Its beak is curved and its morphology allows it to filter mud and water. It lives in groups of several hundred, even thousands of individuals and is present on the site all year long. Up to 3,000 birds have lived in the ponds of Palavas.



**EUROPEAN POND TERRAPIN**  
(*Emys orbicularis*)

The European pond terrapin lives in freshwater wetlands, calm and sunny: marshes, ponds, canals... It enjoys muddy bottoms and abundant aquatic vegetation that provide food and shelter. It can be recognized by the black color punctuated with yellow spots on its head, neck, legs and tail. This secretive and shy species is in decline throughout its range. In the Ramsar site, it is present in the Estagnol nature reserve where it has benefited from a reintroduction program and in the Méjean marshes.



**SEA LAVENDER**  
(*Limonium girardianum*)

This pioneer species is linked to bare sandy beaches, rarely flooded, on the periphery of lagoons or on the coast. A rare and protected species in France, it forms the Mediterranean salt steppes; this natural habitat is a priority on the European scale. In the site of the Palavasian ponds, this habitat is located on the marshes of the Grande Palude, but especially on the edge of the Aresquiers wood and on the Frontignan salt flats.

## Management and conservation



The territory of the Ponds of Palavas is covered by four Natura 2000 land and marine sites, as well as two prefectural decrees for the protection of biotopes and a national nature reserve on the Estagnol wetland.

More than 2,400 hectares are protected by the Conservatoire du littoral, which has attached several managers: the municipality of Lattes for the Méjean marshes, the Conservatoire d'espaces naturels du Languedoc-Roussillon and the Syndicat mixte des étangs littoraux (Siel) for the Villeneuve salt pans.

Montpellier Métropole and Sète Agglopolé Méditerranée, as well as the agglomeration of the Pays de l'Or, ensure the management of sites that concern their territories. Since 2009, Siel has been managing the Natura 2000 land sites; the Syndicat du bassin du Lez and the Syndicat mixte du bassin de Thau are responsible for the management of their respective Water Development and Management Plan (SAGE).



## Biodiversity

The diversity of environments is linked to multiple ecological factors such as the alternation of fresh and salt water environments and the phenomena of flooding and exodus. The peripheral wetlands present a remarkable ecological richness based on a fragile balance between freshwater inflow and the presence of brackish water. The ponds are supplied with salt water by the gaus, pioneer environments essential to the reproduction of larolimicoles.

The site has twenty natural habitats of community interest, more than 31 species of birds, many rare and protected plant species such as the small-flowered scorzonera, the thornless bugrana or the summer nivéole, and many reptiles (European cistude, leprosy emyde).

Finally, the lagoon environments are breeding grounds for fish such as eels, wolves and sea breams and shelter a rich aquatic flora (eelgrass and ruppia meadows, large mother-of-pearl, etc).



### The Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, commonly known as the Ramsar Convention, is a global inter-governmental treaty that provides the frame-work for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. It is the only global treaty to focus on one single ecosystem.