The Westerschelde & Saeftinghe, a Natura 2000 area, is one of the two estuary areas in the Netherlands where fresh and salt water intermingle naturally. The Scheldt has an open connection with the North Sea. That results in a unique nature area, not only in and on the water but also outside the dikes. The salt marshes, sandbanks, beaches and sparsely vegetated soils are enormously important for coastal breeding birds. A range of migratory birds depend on the Westerschelde & Saeftinghe as a wintering location, as a place to moult or as a stopover. At low tide, the sandbanks are exposed and you can see the birds scurrying around in search of food. Seals rest with their pups on the sandbanks of the Western Scheldt estuary.

Seals on the sandbanks
Two types of seal live in the Western Scheldt area: the common seal and the grey seal. You will often see these beautiful animals at low tide on the sandbanks of Valkenisse, the Baarland ridge, and the High Sandbanks. The sandbanks are an important location for the seals. This the only place where they can rest and suckle their pups. When people come near, the animals are quick to take flight into the water. So be careful not to disturb seals! You can tell whether you are disturbing them by their behaviour: as long as a seal is lying in a relaxed position, you are far enough away. If it lifts its head, you’re too close.

Safe breeding and resting area
At low tide, an area of 1,800 hectares of mudflats and sandbanks emerges from the water off the coast near Breskens: the High Sandbanks. Large numbers of birds come here to feed. At high tide, this area disappears below the waves, with the exception of the ‘Bol’. This is an important breeding area for different types of bird. That is why access to some of this area is prohibited all year round in order to allow birds to rest and to protect their eggs and nests. There is a ban on anchoring to the south of the area. Signs and buoys show where access is allowed.

In August, you will see large numbers of shelducks on the sandbanks in the Western Scheldt: they come here to moult. During this period, their new feathers are growing and so the birds can’t fly. It is important to keep a distance so that the birds are left in peace as they prepare to migrate.

Leisure and enjoyment
The Western Scheldt estuary is a beautiful area for cycling, fishing, boating or swimming. But there are also rules to protect nature where necessary in this Natura 2000 area. As a result, access to certain parts of the Western Scheldt estuary is prohibited or restricted, sometimes on a seasonal basis. You are not allowed to cycle outside the dikes at certain times so as not to disturb the birds here. That is good to know if you plan to spend your leisure time on or around the Western Scheldt estuary.

A visit to the Drowned Land of Saeftinghe is highly recommended! Here, you can experience the tides, the influence of the sea and the Scheldt. Access is not freely permitted to a large part of Saeftinghe, not only to protect nature but also, indeed primarily, for safety reasons. The tide can rise surprisingly quickly. The guides of Het Zeeuwse Landschap will be happy to show you around the area.
There are no fewer than seven official kitesurfing locations in the Western Scheldt estuary. The locations have been chosen to ensure that protected animals such as birds and seals are not disturbed by kitesurfing. So it is important to stay inside the designated zone.

**Natura 2000**
Westerschelde & Saeftinghe is a Natura 2000 area. Natura 2000 is a network of protected nature areas in Europe. For more information, see www.rwsnatura2000.nl.