

Gwithian Towans Local Nature Reserve

Welcome to the Towans - Towans a'gas Dynnergh

From the Cornish 'Tewyn', meaning 'sand dune', the towans between Hayle and Gwithian make up Cornwall's second largest sand dune ecosystem, extending for around 400 hectares. The famous beaches of St Ives Bay lying below you provide a continuous supply of sand to maintain these dunes.

Ownership

Gwithian Towans Common is registered as Common Land and owned by the Charles Hockin Trust. It was registered as a Local Nature Reserve in 2006. The Common is overseen by Cornwall Council under a scheme of management and is subject to a series of byelaws to protect the Common.

Wildlife

This area of the Towans lies within the Gwithian to Mexico Towans Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), meaning the area is nationally important for wildlife. Most of Cornwall is underlain by acidic granite rocks which normally support quite species-poor habitats.

By contrast, the Towans contains calcareous soil made up of lime-rich shell sand. This encourages the growth of 300 vascular plant species - a fifth of all plant species found in Cornwall in just 2% of the total land area.

Sand dune archaeology

When sand dunes form, they can cover large areas of land, sometimes dramatically overnight, other times more gradually. This often results in previous human activities being well preserved under the sand. This can include prehistoric human burials, medieval field systems and settlements.

The Wall of Light decoy

Close to the south west corner of this car park, a non-descript concrete structure lies just inland of the coast path. It is in fact a very rare survival from WWII of a decoy structure, which was ignited with petrol in order to distract German bombers away from the nearby port of Hayle.

Wheal Emily mine

Evidence of a tin mine can be seen here, very close to the coastal path and within the cliff face itself as you head north towards Gwithian beach.

As the seasons change, look out for the following wildlife in this part of the towans:

Spring

Hundreds of cream coloured cowslips carpet the short turf areas

Small birds like dunnocks and wrens are singing from bramble perches to define their territories

On warmer days, adders, slow worms and common lizards emerge from hibernation in dense vegetation to bask in the open.



Adder

Summer

The Towans become a riot of colour as many plants flower now. Look out for swathes of yellow bird's-foot trefoil along with numerous pink flowers of pyramidal orchid.

Sunny days at this time of year fill the air with butterflies and day flying moths. Look out for the black and red spot Burnet moth and the beautiful Silver studded Blue butterfly, which has one of its biggest populations in the country here.

Look out for glow worms shining in the grass on summer evenings.

Overhead, skylarks will be singing. The Towans holds good numbers of these declining ground-nesting birds.

Keep your dog under closer control during these months to reduce disturbance.

In late summer, the beautiful blue flowers of viper's bugloss can be seen, especially in areas where sand is more disturbed- such as near rabbit holes.



Skylark



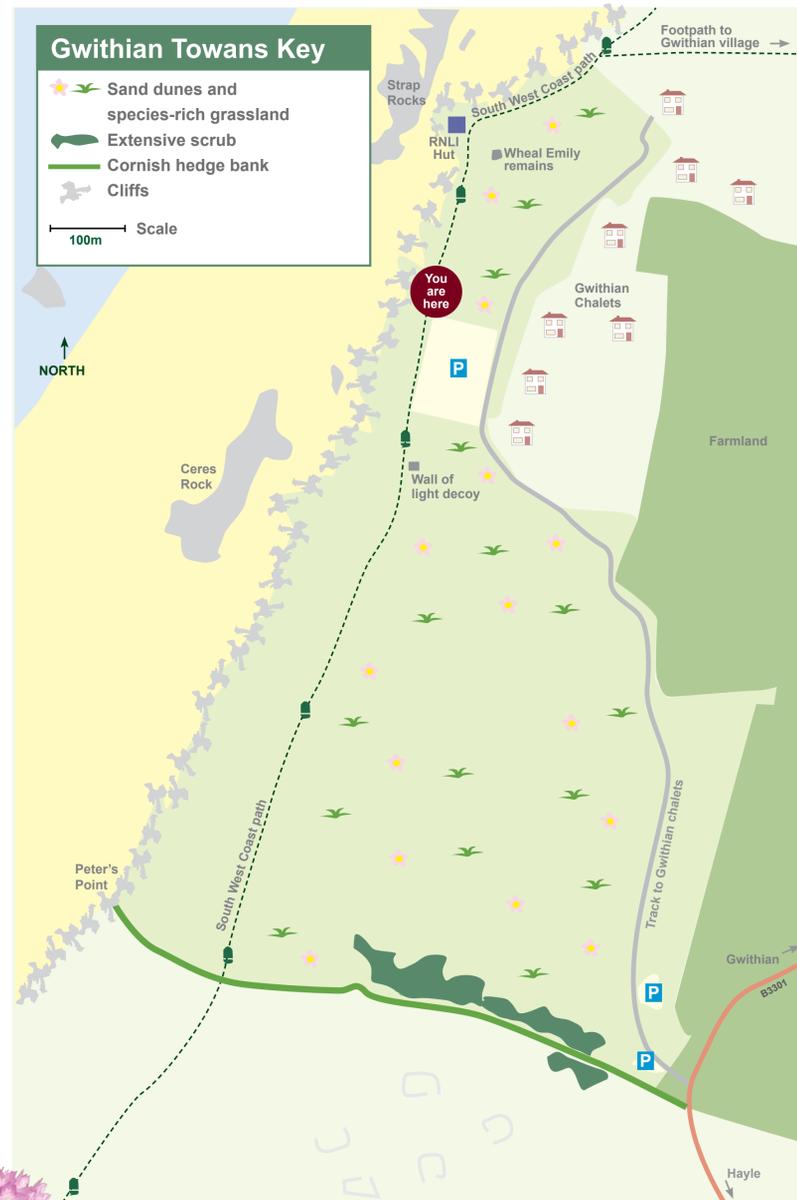
Pyramidal Orchid



Silver-studded Blue



Dark Green Fritillary



Look after yourself and the wildlife

- Adders are quite common. They normally feel the vibration of your feet and move away before you see them, but in early spring take special care as they may be slower to move away.
- Don't drop litter or light barbecues on the dunes - as well as being unsightly, remains can injure wildlife and vegetation.
- If you are walking a dog, ensure you

- pick up after it - other visitors will not welcome the dung, and it also causes changes to the rare vegetation.
- Be careful not to step in a rabbit hole and take more care in any steep or eroding dunes, as the ground may give way.
- Motorbikes and bikes are not permitted here.

Photo Credits: Silver-studded Blue and Dark Green Fritillary; David Chapman.



White lipped snail shells

That's amazing!
A wind of only 16 kilometre/hour can pick up and carry a sand grain.

Winter

The dunes provide a great vantage point time to watch for gannets and other seabirds feeding in St Ives Bay, while the nearby St Gothian's Sands Local Nature Reserve, just a little further north from here, is a great place to look for visiting ducks and gulls during winter.

Resident stonechats are quite obvious during winter, flitting between bramble or privet perches or foraging on the ground.

When vegetation has died back, this is a great time for finding empty shells from the abundant white-lipped and painted snails, which are widespread across the Towans.



Bird's foot trefoil

Funding for this board was kindly provided by the Gwinear/Gwithian Sustainable Communities Fund



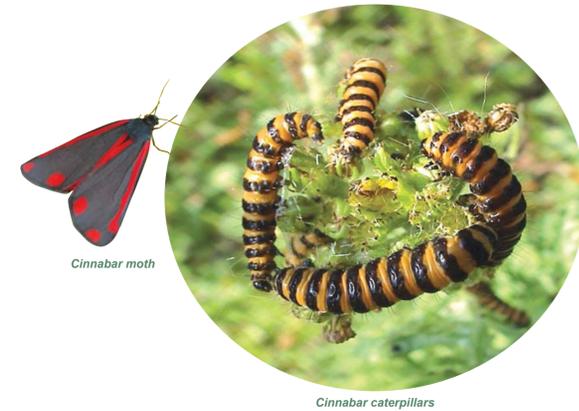
Rabbit

Autumn

Yellow flowers of ragwort are common now, some plants containing the black and gold caterpillars of the cinnabar moth.

Privet bushes are covered in pungent cream flowers now, often visited by butterflies such as small tortoiseshell and red admiral.

After a good summer, many young rabbits can be seen across the towans. Grazing by rabbits is crucial to maintain the species-rich short grassland areas.



Cinnabar caterpillars

