

Mexico Towans SSSI

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

Mexico Towans is owned by the LaTouche family and is managed under a Conservation Agreement with Natural England.

Sand dune formation

A strong onshore wind blows sand across the vast open beaches lying along the edge of the bay. On reaching an obstacle such as rocks, driftwood, marine debris or vegetation, the sand drops down onto the ground. When this process is continually repeated, sand piles up and dunes begin to form. The dunes at Phillack have built to about 50m above sea level.

Specialised plants begin to colonise, trapping more sand and so the habitat develops.

Coastal protection

Dunes provide a vital role in protecting coastal towns and farmland from flooding and erosion. In some coastal locations, sand has been removed for channel navigability, or for use in agriculture. This can lead to erosion of the dunes which can then threaten areas of low-lying land with flooding. Whenever possible today, dunes are conserved and carefully managed to prevent this happening.

Wildlife

Most 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 areas of sand dune in Cornwall contain calcareous soil made up of lime-rich shell sand. This allows about 300 different plants to occur - a fifth of all the plant species found in Cornwall, growing on 2% of the land area!



Dunnock

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.



Slow worm

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 six spot burnet moth and the beautiful silver studded blue butterfly, which has one of its biggest populations in the country here.

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.



Pyramidal Orchid



Marram grass

That's amazing! Marvellous marram - In the whole dune-forming process, most important plant. Large areas of the dunes are clothed by this tall, buff-coloured grass which grows best when sand is blown onto it, encouraging it to grow upwards and send out new runners.



Small Tortoiseshell

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.



Gannets

Winter

Colour may have drained from the towans now, but there is still a lot to look out for. This is the season when Dartmoor ponies often return to help the rabbits with the task of trying to reduce the expansion of scrub vegetation.

As well as helping the site, using these pedigree animals also helps to protect a rare native breed.

The dunes give provide a great vantage point time to watch for gannets and other seabirds feeding in St Ives Bay. The nearby Hayle Estuary RSPB reserve attracts many waders and waterbirds to seek winter quarters in a milder part of the country, and is worth a separate visit.

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



Cowslips

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.



Protecting the Towans from Hayle to Godrevy



Red Admiral



Cinnabar caterpillars

