

St Gothian Sands 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.

St Gothian Sands – Ownership and explanation of name

Formerly known as Gwithian Sandpit, this area was a focus for gravel and sand extraction for many years- for agriculture and building – until Cornwall Council took over the ownership and management of the area in 2003. It was designated as a Local Nature Reserve in 2005. One of the key features is an artificial lagoon created by the removal of sand. The site was renamed after the Medieval St Gothian's Oratory which was located in the dunes to the east.

Coastal dynamics

The large bank behind the beach, running south from the Red River is in fact artificial, placed here to protect the site while extraction took place.

On high tides and in winter storms, sea water is already moving inland behind the lower section of this bank. In time, it is expected that much of the bund will erode away, causing tidal or saline habitats to develop behind them. This will introduce further valuable habitat diversity, and should be encouraged whenever possible, although movement of features such as paths will need to be carefully planned.

Wildlife

This area of the Towans lies next to the Gwithian to Mexico Towans Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) meaning the area is nationally important for wildlife.

Several areas were fenced-off when the LNR was established, in order to provide sanctuaries away from disturbance by dogs and humans.

The sand dune areas of Cornwall contain calcareous soil containing lime-rich shell sand. This allows about 300 different species of vascular plants to occur- a fifth of all plant species found in Cornwall growing on 2% of the total land area.

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

Spring

From early March, flocks of sand martins, with swallows and house martins can be seen skimming over the water in the main lagoon. These migrants have just returned from overwintering in Africa.

Wheatears have also come back - these are easily viewed on the open dune grasslands around the edge of the lagoon.



House Martin

Summer

A number of birds breed successfully in the main sanctuary area. Have a look for young mallards, Canada geese, moorhens and shelduck.

A colony of sand martins nests in the sand cliff on the eastern side of the lagoon.

The adjacent towans south of the lagoon 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. The latter species has one of its biggest populations in the country on the Hayle to Gwithian dunes, and St Gothian Sands provides a vital 'bridge' linking to the population on Godrevy Towans to the north.

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.



Cinnabar moth



Stonechat



Skylark



Pyramidal Orchid

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 barbeques 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 on the Towans.

Silver-studded Blue



Moorhen

Autumn

Many waders and waterfowl visit St Gothian Sands on their autumn migration south for the winter. Look out for waders such as dunlin along the waters' edge.

Winter

Wintering gulls, geese and ducks visit the lagoon in larger numbers during winter. Quite a number of scarce species have been recorded, such as little gull, ring-billed gull and scaup, so the larger flocks are always worth a careful scan.

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

Several large clumps of sharp rush can be easily seen beside the path near to the roadside entrance. This plant is nationally scarce and only occurs in two places in west Cornwall.



Bird's-foot trefoil

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St Gothian Sands' Industrial past

The Red River enters the sea at the Gwithian beach. It gets its name from mineral waste associated with tin mining in the Camborne/Redruth area. In the late 19th century, deposits of tin ore were extracted from the beach sand and processed on site. Horses and carts were used to transport the sand as well as buckets suspended on wires attached to pylons which were bedded in concrete blocks and can still be seen.



There are the remains of an engine house on the beach connected to a chimney below the electricity station, probably part of Wheal Confidence according to documents from 1831.

