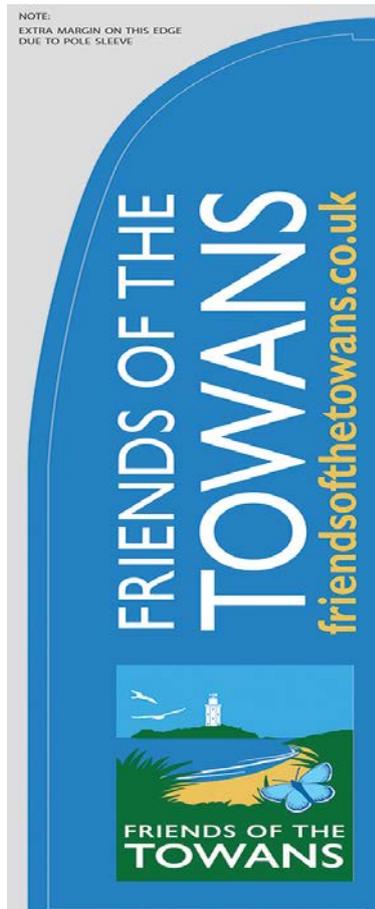


SPRING NEWSLETTER & EVENTS 2021



Look out for our new 10ft high Sail flags on the Towans soon!

I hope you are all well after what seems to have been a very long and fairly wet winter. At least we finally got a nice dry spell – ended today, so I am at the computer! We got loads done outside at home, and have been enjoying sounds of birdsong, seeing new flowers emerge, hearing distant young lambs etc – lovely!

This all bodes well for the first big easing of lock-down on March 29th, which will allow us to meet again in groups of 6 to carry out work. There is so much for us to catch up with, and it'll be really nice to be able to enjoy doing this as a group, while feeling the warmth coming through and observing spring re-awakening the Towans. Those classic March migrant birds wheatear and sand martin have already been spotted, and swallows won't be long now.

Since we last met in December, contractors have been busy cutting back scrub in several areas, most notably the western edge of Mexico Towans, St Ives Bay Park and on Godrevy Warren. As we'll be starting work in the bird-nesting season, we won't do any new cutting, but instead, it will be really helpful raking up and removing lots of the cuttings.

We hope to welcome some new volunteers, as both Andy – from the Dynamic Dunescapes project – and I have had enquiries this winter from quite a lot of people wanting to get involved. With this in mind, I thought it would be useful to briefly describe the logic behind why we cut and clear ‘scrub’ – bushes, brambles, etc – as it may seem a bit drastic.

Sand dunes occupy only 2% of Cornwall, and yet they contain about 20% of all the plant species found here, as well as many scarce, rare and specialised insects, declining skylarks and important reptile populations – adder, slow worm and lizard. Virtually the whole Towans from Hayle to Godrevy are recognised as being **nationally important** for wildlife through being designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). That’s a dull title, but it basically means it’s the **natural equivalent of a cathedral, castle or stately home!**

Most of these rare species are associated with the **grassland** areas – both the distinctive tall marram grass areas - as well as the shorter rabbit-grazed turf, *not* the scrub (bushy) areas.

Prior to around the 1950s, when farming was more dominant in these locations, grazing livestock kept the proportion of scrub relatively low. Gradually, **tourism and recreation** – for example dog walking – made farming these areas more difficult and so livestock farming ceased. This enabled the scrub to become more dominant in many areas, to the detriment of the characteristic sand dune wildlife.

So, by carefully targeting the removal of some of the scrub we are trying to restore habitats for the wildlife across the whole landscape. As the scrub is a natural and component part of the dune ecosystem – for example, it is especially important for nesting birds and hibernating reptiles – we aim to retain much of it, but in *smaller, more scattered clumps*. It’s the extensive banks of it that gradually alter the ecology, as little can grow underneath once the ground becomes heavily shaded, and years of leaf drop enriches the soil, making it less suitable to support sand dune grassland.

When considering which scrub to cut, we use the following rationale:

- Target areas of non-native species such as sea buckthorn and cotoneaster
- Target areas of *young* scrub where its is starting to colonise the grassland, but could be removed relatively easily (unlike older, more established scrub, which is also more important for nesting birds etc)
- Target scrub on south or south-west facing slopes, as these are favoured by insects and reptiles due to being warmer
- Target existing grassy clearings or rides which are at risk of becoming overgrown by scrub, as grassland can then expand again
- Target scrub along footpaths, to enable easier public access

Once scrub has been cut, we try to rake up and burn or stack as many of the cuttings as we can. This creates *bare sand* for animals to bask on as well as exposing the *seed bank* to enable new plants to germinate. Also, if these cuttings were left to rot down, their nutrients would enrich the soil, greatly reducing its value to support sand dune vegetation. The same impact arises if **dog mess** is not picked up and is allowed to rot down.

So, I can assure you, there is method in what might look like our madness! It is heartening to see how this process has reaped benefits across the Towans in recent years – along with help from the ponies of course, who, by eating the older matted grass seem to prepare the way for the rabbits to maintain healthy grassland into the future.

If you'd like to get involved in this work over the next few months, there's a full list of outings below. We're not all 'blood, sweat and tears' though.....we also run guided walks to observe this wonderful wildlife!

Sadly, all our walks were cancelled in 2020, but we will resume these again in 2021, if restrictions allow. I will produce and circulate a separate programme very soon covering walks, so watch our website for more details www.friendsofthetowans.org.uk

Thanks for your continued work and company, and I hope to work with you again very soon.

PRACTICAL CONSERVATION SESSIONS

March-June 2021

Obviously all of this going ahead is dependent upon the Covid restrictions being lifted.

All events **start at 10am and run until about 2pm**. I will bring tools, gloves and biscuits, but please could you bring your own drinks and lunch and appropriate clothing and footwear suitable for working in the exposed Towans' environment.

Due to the current limitation to 6 people, it is essential that you contact me in advance to book a place. martinrule@talktalk.net; mobile - 07854 123 877

Due to additional funding via the Dynamic Dunescape project, I am now able to run groups on **Tuesdays** as well as our usual **Thursdays**.

Mexico Towans

A tractor has flail-cut many areas across Mexico Towans, focusing especially around the NW corner, which has received no conservation management for many years. This has allowed large banks of bramble to develop. If we can rake up and burn the cuttings, this will enable the grassland species to thrive again in this area of the dunes and cliff-top.

Dates are listed below; meeting place will be advised once you contact me.

Tues March 30th

Thurs April 1st, Tues 6th, Thurs 8th, Tues 13th, Thurs 15th

Godrevy Warren

Much of last winters' contractor work focussed in the SE corner, trying to uncover overgrown archaeology. We have a lot of follow-up raking and burning to do here. Meeting point will be advised upon booking with me.

Tue April 20th, Thur 22nd, Tue 27th, Thur 29th

Gwithian Green Nature Reserve

Our old favourite has been missing your attention! We'll now concentrate on restoring the old Cornish hedge by the elm copse as well as carrying out some path improvements.

Meet in car park just north of Gwithian Church at SW587/413.

Tue May 4th, Thur 6th, Tue 11th, Thur 13th

St Ives Bay Holiday Park

Contractors cleared an impressive area of sea buckthorn and clematis last winter from the high dunes to the north of the camping area. They did a good job raking the cuttings, but there are more we can remove, along with digging out plants such as ragwort and thistle that love to move in and take over these bare areas.

We will also remove old fencing and non-native plants from some areas of previous dune-stabilisation works.

Tue May 18th, Thur 20th, Tue 25th, Thur 27th

Upton Towans Nature Reserve

Contractors were busy in Upton again last winter, and we'll be sure to have follow-up digging of re-growth and opportunistic weeds, as we've done before. Our work in the past here on some of the old World War One bunker slopes has had very good results, with many dune plants now colonising. This will be a lovely time of year to observe both the flowers and insects alongside you, whilst doing some gentle, useful exercise!

Tue June 1st, Thur 3rd, Tues 8th, Thur 10th

June 25th is International Sand Dunes Day.....nothing planned yet, only just found out, but save the date!

As always, I'll be sure to fit extra days in as and when, and to swap some to dodge bad weather, but I hope this gives you something to plan around and look forward to.

Hope to see you very soon
Martin Rule 07854 123 877
Towans Ranger