

# Out on the Towans: Battling the blackthorn

*by Martin Rule, Towans Ranger*

**I hope you're enjoying bracing walks on wild, open beaches and cliff paths.**

Our work on the Towans continues through the winter – in fact, this is when we carry out most of our practical habitat management. With plants dormant, birds not nesting and reptiles hibernating, this is the ideal time to cut back encroaching bushes – gorse, brambles, privet etc – to benefit the rare dune grassland species and enable them to expand.

It's not all about wildlife, however. A focus of our work this winter is up on Godrevy Warren, the high ground north of the Red River, just before it enters St Ives Bay. This is one of the richest archaeological sites in Cornwall, if not the country! People lived on this site from at least the Bronze Age until the 17th century – five main periods of settlement have been identified through extensive archaeological digging from the 1940s to the 1960s. Settlements were each abandoned in turn, due to large amounts of sand blowing onto the site. This has preserved many



landscape features – even ancient plough marks and animal footprints!

The first Bronze Age houses ever found in Britain were discovered here in the 1950s, and we've been busy this winter cutting back dense clumps of blackthorn – some over 10 feet high – which risk damaging these features. Blackthorn has a vigorous root system and sends up many suckers, which can damage underground structures.

This site is private and is managed under a Countryside Stewardship scheme, funded by Natural England. I'm developing a plan for organised walks and events, so people can enjoy this special place and learn more about it. Details will appear in due course on our website – <https://friendsofthetowans.co.uk/> – where you can also learn more about the history of the Warren – and our new Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsoftheTowans>

You can't fail to notice the beautiful white cattle grazing here. This is a rare breed – Whitebred Shorthorn or Cumberland White – and these pedigree animals are owned and looked after by the fantastic Gerald Babcock of Pendeen. Gerald also grazes Shetland and Dartmoor ponies on sites across the Towans during the winter. Grazing is crucial to help keep the grassland healthy. It removes the old 'thatch' in the grass, enabling other plants to germinate, and helps the rabbits get a head-start in grazing some areas even shorter. It's the short-turf areas that support most of the rare and delicate plant species. A further benefit of grazing is that it greatly reduces the risk of summer fires, by removing a lot of the dry fuel close to the ground.

We always welcome new volunteers, so if you'd like to join us in looking after the Towans, just drop me an email at [martinrule@talktalk.net](mailto:martinrule@talktalk.net)

