Out on the Towans:
Digging dynamic dunes

by Martin Rule, Towans Ranger

FRIENDS OF THE TOWANS

As you read this, much of the winter work on the Towans will be drawing to a close. We've successfully grazed a number of locations, including some areas for the first time in years. People quite often ask me how the Towans used to be managed, and my answer is that traditionally – by which I mean until maybe the 1960s or 70s for much of the area – grazing with cattle and sheep would apparently have been much more extensive. If anybody has any proof of this – such as photos – please do get in touch!

I suspect there was less variety of wildlife around then, as grazing would have been more intense and year-round, given the dry ground and balmy conditions. As tourism and public access increased, it became much harder to manage livestock safely, so areas like the Towans were gradually abandoned. This is when what is usually know as scrub – various woody shrubs and trees – started to appear in more profusion.

So, a large focus for us in winter is to reduce areas of scrub to benefit wildlife such as reptiles and insects, and also dune grassland. We do this in the winter, when the birds aren't nesting. However, I wanted to give you a 'heads-up' that this year you will see some additional work taking place that might look quite alarming!

Half a century or so of leaf-drop each autumn has slowly enriched the soil, which has gradually changed it from being a sand dune and moved it towards being scrub or woodland. Believe it or not, about 70% of the invertebrates in the dunes prefer the more open areas – so as these become grown over, those species are lost. Our plan, therefore, is to dig away the root zone under some of the cut scrub areas so that we expose the sand again. This will be done using a JCB (or similar), and will take place in late spring, once any hibernating reptiles have emerged from the root zones.

You will see this taking place on Mexico Towans, where we hope to remove tipped rubbish at the same time. Cornwall Wildlife Trust is aiming to do similar work on Upton Towans, which is a critical part of the Dynamic Dunescapes project – dunes are meant to be 'dynamic' – ie move around, which depends greatly upon exposed sand being accessible to the wind, not covered by bushes.

As always, I'd be happy to discuss this with anyone who want to know more, or has concerns about the work taking place, so please email me at martinrule@talktalk.net

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