

# Out on the Towans:

## Looking after a very special landscape

*by Martin Rule, Towans Ranger*

Lying in an arc along the eastern edge of St Ives Bay are the famous 'three miles of golden sands' which make up the beach reaching from the Hayle River to Godrevy. Many people may not realise that immediately behind this beach is the second largest sand dune system in Cornwall.

Most of Cornwall is underlain by acidic granite, such as at Trencrom Hill, whereas on the Towans - Cornish for 'dunes' - the land is alkaline, formed from calcareous shell sand. Many plants and animals occur here that are rarely found elsewhere in Cornwall. Indeed, although only 2% of Cornwall is sand dune, more than 20% of all the county's plant species occur here! The Towans also support many thousands of silver-studded blue butterflies - in fact, this is one of the best sites in the UK for that species.

So we are incredibly blessed to have this important and rich wildlife habitat on our doorstep. Virtually the whole area is recognised for its wildlife value by being a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which basically means it's a nationally-important wildlife site. This is a nature-equivalent of a cathedral, castle or Roman villa, if you like.

However, such areas do not sit there and look after themselves. Threats come in a range of forms such as the risk of built development, climate change, pressure from recreational use etc. One of the most significant threats is actually less obvious, as it relates to what is called 'benign

neglect'. In previous decades, much of the Towans would have been grazed by livestock - primarily cows and sheep. As these areas have become more visited by people for recreation, farmers have abandoned grazing.

This has led to the more vigorous woody vegetation - brambles, gorse, privet etc - expanding and growing over many of the more species-rich grassy areas, which contain the most important and scarcer flora and fauna.

