

The Treasures of the Sefton Coast

by Trevor Davenport ARPS

It is a surprising fact that the largest dune complex in England lies to the west of the industrial areas of Merseyside and Lancashire between the estuaries of the Mersey and Ribble. This duneland, covering some 22 kms in a narrow, gentle curve on the edge of the Irish Sea, is one of the finest and most important dune complexes in Europe, enclosing a variety of nationally scarce habitats such as fixed dunes, mobile dunes, dune slacks and dune heathlands. As habitats of this nature are under constant threat and in decline, the area is becoming ever more important as an example of the wealth of species diversity, both botanical and animal, that these habitats maintain.

Our journey begins above the town of Bootle, which is about 6 km north of Liverpool. Here there is a man-made 'shingle beach' produced from 'war-spoil'; supposedly, rubble from the residue of demolished houses that were bombed in the second world war. The aging shingle contains a number of unusual plants including the delightful Yellow-horned Poppy (*Glaucium flavum*).

Further north, near the mouth of the River Alt is the Altcar Training Camp, where, for six days a week, our soldiers practice at the shooting ranges. This restricted area supports almost 25,000 spikes of the beautiful Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) in May. This is the largest count of this declining species in the northwest of England and may be visited with permission on guided walks on Fridays. The undisturbed meadows of the ranges are flushed with colour each spring with orchids of several different species and many hybrids, as well as spring flowers of many declining species. Mowing is purposefully delayed each year until late July by which time seeds for next year will have been ripened.

Many birds find refuge at the camp, and the Alt Estuary itself is part of a series of internationally important estuaries for migrating and wintering wildfowl and wading birds, holding, at times, over 50,000 birds including Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*); Redshank (*Tringa totanus*); Knot (*Calidris canutus*); Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*); Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) and Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*). Wintering skeins of honking Pinkfeet containing several hundred individuals are one of the highlights of mornings and evenings throughout the area.

North of the camp lies Cabin Hill National Nature Reserve, a quiet 30ha area of former sandwinning works and borrow pits which has naturalised into seasonally flooded areas rich in wildlife.

A short distance further north is an amazing 'blow-hole' known as Devil's Hole; a huge wind scoured hollow about twice the size of Wembley Stadium and the largest in the dune system. In the damp bottom of the crater plant rarities such as Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*); Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*); Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagalis tenella*) can be found, together with the Red Data listed Northern Dune Tiger Beetle (*Cicindela hybrida*) - a fast moving predator unique to this area and a small part of Cumbria.

Continuing north is an extensive area of sandhills known as Ravenmeols and Lifeboat Road. This is a remote and undisturbed network of hills and hollows clothed in Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) and a wealth of wild flowers to delight the heart of any botanist. This year, after weeks of unseasonal rain, this area has produced a flower display to equal any that might appear in the desert after the first rains. It brought to mind TV spectaculars from Namaqualand or California with swathes of bright blue Harebells (*Campanula rotundifolia*) amongst the golden grasses; Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) providing nectaring for Dark Green Fritillaries (*Argynnis aglaja*), and some 5000 Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) on the northern slopes. (It's been an excellent year for Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) too.) On the more exposed areas the umbels of Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) are a favourite nectaring plant for Grayling butterflies (*Hipparchia semele*).

Perhaps the most famous, and the most visited, parts of the Sefton Coast, are the pinewoods and beach at Formby. Here is the central area for the Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) which, until recent outbreaks of squirrel-pox, were easy to see in good numbers. Today, they are making a slow recovery from the disease and numbers are increasing. The pinewoods at Formby and Ainsdale can be a splendid location for fungi hunting in good years with an outstanding variety of species including Earthstars (*Geastrum spp*) and many others. Recent years have been somewhat disappointing for fungi but hopefully this year may prove an exception after the rains.

Continuing towards the seaside town of Southport is a small but extremely rare habitat, recently acquired by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, known as Freshfield Dune Heath. Now under restoration and open to the public, this tiny fragment of dune heathland is almost all that remains of this habitat in northern England, and is home to specialised species such as the endangered Sand Lizard (*Lacerta agilis*). A recent release of about 90 young lizards will, hopefully, establish a good breeding population. A number of other specialised plants and animals live here including one of my favourites - the Emperor Moth (*Saturnia pavonia*).

North from Formby lie the holiday beaches of Ainsdale, Birkdale and Southport but behind these popular beaches are excellent areas of fixed and mobile dunes. Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve and Ainsdale Sandhills contain some superb habitat for a number of rare and endangered species including the Natterjack Toad (*Epidalea calamita*), Northern Dune Tiger Beetle, and Sand Lizards. The dune slacks are home to a number of dragonfly species and in specific locations there can be an abundance of moth and butterfly species. Moth species in serious national decline; e.g. Goat Moth (*Cossus cossus*); Forester Moth (*Adscita statives*) and Portland Moth (*Actebia praecox*) are recorded annually here. In a small area near to the Ainsdale Discovery Centre an irruption of White Satin Moth (*Leucoma salicis*) has occurred for the past two years with up to 1000 individuals of this lovely moth species fluttering gently about during late May and early June.

North from Ainsdale, commencing at Sands Lake, is a long narrow strip of outstanding dunescape known as the Birkdale Sandhills. For me this is a special area, rich beyond measure in plants, insects and in scenic beauty. On the seaward side is an area of great scientific interest known as 'The Green Beach' - a narrow strip of newly-formed dunes, some 5 km long - containing a large number of plants (over 300 vascular plants now recorded), insects and Natterjack Toads. Each year during August, a group of hardy souls spend summer nights searching for the extremely rare and endangered Sandhill Rustic Moth (*Luperina nickerlii*, sub sp gueneei), which is known only here and in North Wales.

Finally, to Southport and beyond; to the Ribble Marshes and the R.S.P.B. reserve at Crossens and Marshside; a must for keen birders and photographers with long lenses.





The Sefton Coast is, generally, an area of benign weather; indeed, a famous weather broadcaster is reputed to have said that Formby enjoys the best weather in the entire UK. Be that as it may, it can also be annoyingly fickle, and onshore breezes on soft summer days can test the patience of even the most dedicated insect photographer trying to capture a butterfly on a flower head dancing in the wind; and, as a group of us found earlier this year, the coast can sometimes throw the fiercest of storms our way.

All along this lovely stretch of coastline access is easy and seldom restricted. On hot, sunny days, the beaches at Southport, Ainsdale and Formby may be filled with the noisy confusion of sunseekers, cars and kite-surfers; but here, just a stones throw away, in the sandy, flower-filled folds of duneland, enriched with lark song, orchids and the sweet, heady fragrance of water mint, I seldom see a soul. I think I like it that way.

