

Les Blanches Banques

Site of Special (Ecological) Interest



Introduction

The sand dunes of Les Blanches Banques, set in and around St Ouen's Bay in St Brelade and at the heart of the Jersey National Park is recognised biologically as being one of the richest sites of its kind in the Island and has been described as 'undoubtedly one of the premier dune systems in Europe for its scientific interest'. As the most extensive area of sandy soils in Jersey, the dunes support good populations of many animals and plants on the Island that are not found elsewhere. The site is mostly publically owned and covers 1.15 km² from the marram grass covered seaside dune back towards the more scrubby wooded valleys at Les Quennevais. Les Blanches Banques is designated as a site of Special Interest by reason of the special zoological, botanical, archaeological and historical interest which can be found there.



Heath dog-violet

Add to these layers of interest the wonderful views of St Ouen's Bay and the appreciation showed by the high number of visitors it receives the importance of this site becomes apparent

History

The earliest likely settlers of Les Blanches Banques were the Neolithic (6,000 – 4,500 yrs ago) and their flint scatters can be found outside rabbit burrows to this day. Evidence of settlers since this early date include several menhirs or standing stones and a burial chamber known as The Ossuary where the jumbled bones of 20 people have been uncovered.

During the Medieval period the dune grasslands were used for sheep grazing and stacking sea weed to dry, the latter was used as fertiliser, or was burnt on the dunes to produce potash.

The Five Mile Road, which cuts across the lower dunes was constructed in the late 1800's, during this time granite sea defences were also built along the bay transforming the dunes which once covered almost the entire bay into productive agricultural land.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, the Jersey Militia used the area for training. In addition, a prison camp was constructed on the lower dunes to house 1,500 German prisoners, the foundations of which can still be seen today.

Management

There are three main areas which are targeted for management on the sand dunes.

- 1) Habitat change (over time) - The stabilisation of the dune system caused by the construction of the seawall now allows for the growth of less specialised fast growing vegetation which outcompetes the plants adapted to sand dune conditions. The acidity of the grasslands is increasing over time as a result changing their ecology. Mowing of selected areas and cutting back scrub is essential to maintain the grasslands.
- 2) Dominant plant species - When an ecosystem is altered the new conditions can favour certain plants over others. On the sand dunes, the evergreen oaks (Holm oaks) if left to their devices would dominate the landscape very quickly at the expense of native wildlife. Grazing is key to the health of the dune grasslands and in the

absence of traditional grazing livestock, rabbits play an important part in keeping grasslands sufficiently short to enable the low growing spring annual flowers so special to Les Blanches Banques to flourish.

- 3) Erosion - Sandy soils are very prone to erosion and Les Blanches Banques is a site which is visited and enjoyed by many. To limit the amount of sand lost, dune blow-outs need to be fenced and stabilised, allowing colonising plants such as marram grass to grow.

Wildlife

Les Blanches Banques is among the ten largest single dune systems in the British Isles. It is also the fourth richest in flowering plants. The species rich dune grasslands, listed under the EC Habitats Directive, also support a very high density of insect life with 26 species which do not occur or are now extinct in Britain, and an additional 63 species Nationally Scarce species.

A total of over 400 plant species have been recorded on Les Blanches Banques, many being unique or special to our shores.

Some of the plants found on the sand dunes which are recognised as being of scientific interest include the **Lizard Orchid**, with its flower resembling its reptile namesake; the **Dwarf Pansy**, in Great Britain only found on the Isles of Scilly and the Channel Islands, the **Dog Violet** which is near threatened in the UK and the **Sand Crocus** with its diminutive mauve flower.



Earthstar



Blue-winged grasshopper

Amphibians and reptiles enjoy life on the sand dunes, which harbours five of Jersey's seven species. **Palmate newt** and **Slow Worm** are present but a visitor from mainland Britain will perhaps be more excited by the exotic looking **Green Lizard** with its emerald and aquamarine colouring. Also the **Western Common Toad** is found here rather than the Common Toad of Britain and northern Europe. The **Grass Snake** can be seen here on occasion, they are one of Jersey's rarest animals and the sand dunes remains one of their few strongholds.

The **Blue Winged Grasshopper**, the **Firebug**, the **Queen of Spain Fritillary butterfly**, the **Lesser Bloody-Nosed Beetle**,

exuding a minute drop of blood when alarmed and the

Sand - Bear Spider which ambushes its prey from the entrance of its burrow are all of particular interest to Jersey and our sand dunes.

The **Skylark**, a ground nesting bird with an enchanting song is in decline across Europe and is a local Action Plan species, as is the **Stonechat**, a bird whose call resembles the sound of two pebbles being knocked together.

The sand dunes are very rich in lichens, with 59 different species having been recorded including the very rare and descriptively named **Scrambled Egg Lichen**, and also the rare **Dog Lichen**.



Bloody nosed beetle

Although mushrooms and toadstools are commonly found across the dunes the types of fungus found here tend to be largely uncommon such as the **Winter Stalkball** and varieties of **Earthstar** and **Woodwaxes**.

Every visit to Les Blanchés Banques will reward you with a new experience of a natural wonder from being buffeted by Atlantic gales with a pair of ravens rolling in the turbulence squawking above you to the smell of dry grasses while glimpsing flashes of blue, a distraction signal from blue winged grasshoppers; it's always worth remembering your camera

Visiting

Access to the sand dunes can easily be made from the Les Quennevais area with a path leading directly from the Railway Walk and also from St Ouen's Bay. Car parking can be found at Les Quennevais, Le Braye, La Pulente and Mont a La Brun.

A day out can be planned to include a visit to the sand dunes followed by time spent on the beach. Much of the lower dune is fairly flat but being sandy the footpaths are unsuitable for most wheelchairs and buggies (pushchairs).

Travelling by bus the 12 and 22 can deliver you to St Ouen's bay and the 12a and 15 go to the airport via Les Quennevais. For the more adventurous a walk from Les Quennevais into St Ouen's Bay can be very rewarding.

The sand dunes of Les Blanchés Banques are well worth a visit where the tranquillity and the vibrancy of wildlife busying around you are guaranteed to remain in your memory for a long time to come



Skylark

Photo credits

Anne Haden: Heath dog-violet

Tim Ransom: Bloody nosed beetle, Blue-winged grasshopper

Romano da Costa, Skylark

Nick Aubin: Earthstar

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Biodiversity



Government of Jersey