

# Ayres National Nature Reserve

The Ayres National Nature Reserve is a raised beach with 673 acres (272.5 hectares) of lichen heath and dunes. It was designated an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) in 1996. The land is owned by the Department of Environment, Food & Agriculture (DEFA) and Manx National Heritage. The visitor centre is run by the Manx Wildlife Trust. The Ayres has several special habitats unique on the Island. DEFA is committed to balancing conservation of this special ecosystem with public enjoyment of the area.

## Shingle Beach

The shingle shore is made up of rounded stones of various rock types such as limestone, granite and sandstone. This mobile substrate is a very harsh environment to which only very specialist plant and animal species are adapted.

The plant species have to be tolerant of flooding, high winds and salt spray on a regular basis, so they have developed a waxy layer to prevent water loss and a deep root system to anchor them and gather water. The majority of plants on the shingle beach produce large quantities of seed which aid their dispersal by wind and sea. Sea sandwort, sea rocket and yellow horned poppy are specialist plants that have evolved to cope with salty sea spray and a mobile substrate. Little terns, ringed plovers and oystercatchers lay eggs which are camouflaged to look like pebbles, though sometimes these nests are susceptible to flooding by the sea.

## Sand Dunes

Dunes develop where there is a constant supply of blown sand and marram grass to trap the sand. This habitat, though less harsh than the shingle beach, is colonised by specialist plants tolerant to the salt spray and a mobile free-draining substrate. Colourful plants such as pyramidal orchids, sea holly and sea bindweed can be found during the summer months. From April to July the bubbling call of curlews can be heard throughout the dunes as they hold territories and fend off predators.



Little tern and chick

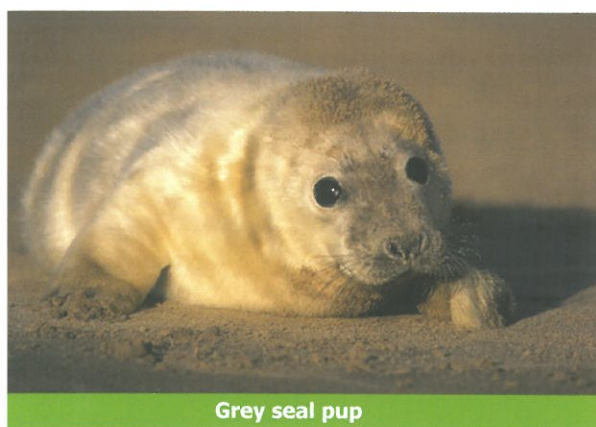
## Lichen Heath

A lichen is a combination of an alga and a fungus. This partnership of two different organisms enables them to grow in barren conditions. The reserve has an internationally important area of lichens which grow amongst the ling (common heather) and bell heather.

This type of habitat cannot be found anywhere else on the Island. Although the lichens can survive in harsh conditions, they do need a long time to grow and are easily crushed during dry weather. Keep an eye out for common lizards. They can be very fast and disappear quickly into any cover. Skylarks and meadow pipits make their presence known by long melodious song flights high above the heath. In places the native western gorse can be found mixed in with the ling and bell heather. It is a low growing shrub with plenty of spines, so please keep to the paths to avoid getting sore ankles and disturbing ground nesting birds.



Common lizard



Grey seal pup

## Dune Slacks

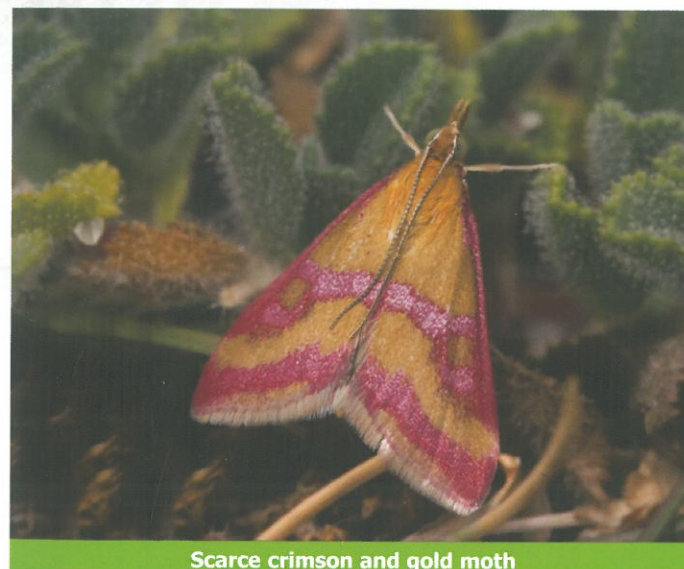
Dune slacks are typically damp hollows between dune ridges. However on the Ayres N.N.R. they occur some distance from the dunes but have many of the species associated with dune slacks. Some of the most colourful plants can be found here. Northern and early marsh orchid flowers form rich purple patches amongst the lush green of grasses and sedges. After a wet winter, pools form which attract birds such as lapwing, shelduck, teal and mallard, some of which stay to breed before the pools dry up. Nearby is the conifer plantation which was planted in 1967 as an experiment by the then Forestry Board.



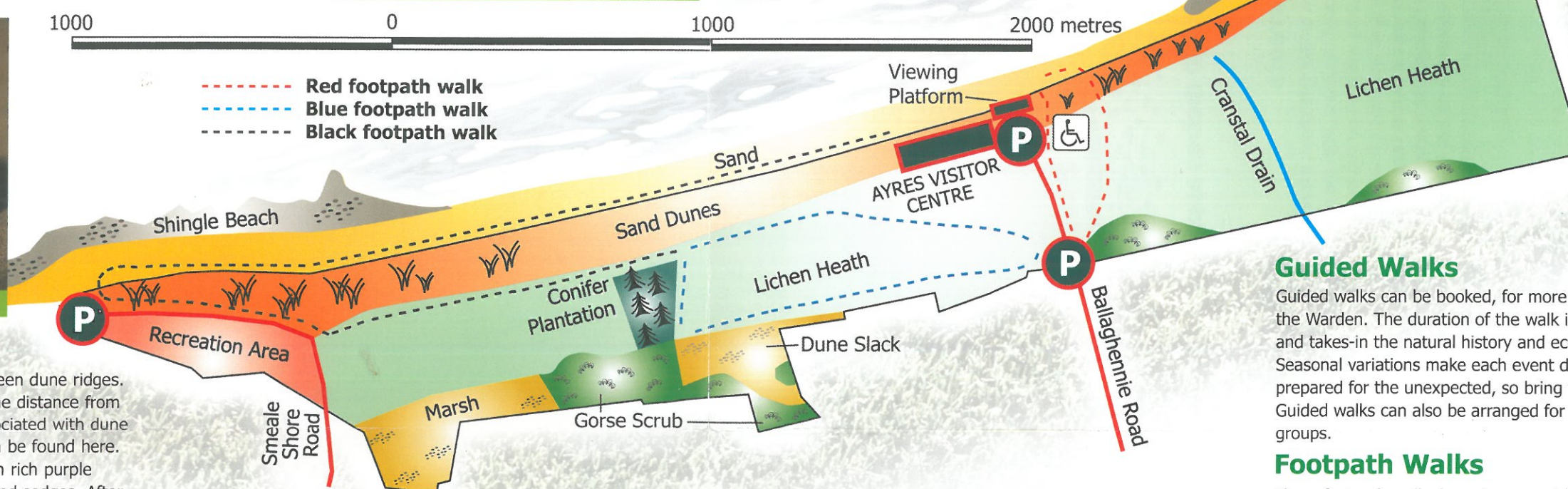
Common blue butterfly

## Gorse Scrub and Bracken

European gorse forms large patches of scrub that are beneficial to a range of small birds. Male yellowhammers can often be heard singing from the tops of bushes during spring and summer. The bright yellow flowers provide a splash of colour even during the winter months. Mixed in with the scrub are dense bramble patches, the flowers of which provide nectar for insects, and cover for nesting whitethroats and stonechats, and blackberries for winter thrushes. Dark green fritillary butterfly larvae feed on dog violets which grow within the stands of bracken. European gorse spreads easily and is managed to reduce its impact on the lichen heath.



Scarce crimson and gold moth



## Guided Walks

Guided walks can be booked, for more information please contact the Warden. The duration of the walk is usually about two hours and takes-in the natural history and ecology of the reserve. Seasonal variations make each event different and you should be prepared for the unexpected, so bring your binoculars. Guided walks can also be arranged for private organisations and groups.

## Footpath Walks

Three footpath walks have been marked out to help visitors to get the most enjoyment from their visit to the reserve. They all begin at the Visitor Centre and are of different lengths and durations. These are highlighted on the leaflet as colour coded dashed lines which match up to stobs in the ground. Select the type of habitat that interests you and follow the path. (Additional guided walk booklet available from the Visitor Centre).

## Visitor Centre

The Manx Wildlife Trust Visitor Centre opens every afternoon from late May to mid September. It offers displays of the Ayres' natural history and is staffed by volunteers who are happy to help with visitor queries. There is a short film about the wildlife of the reserve which visitors may like to see before setting out for a walk. The Visitor Centre contains a small shop where maps, books and souvenirs may be purchased.

For information on any of the above, including Visitor Centre opening times, please visit [www.gov.im](http://www.gov.im) or [www.manxwt.org.uk](http://www.manxwt.org.uk)



Heath bee-fly