

Media Release

Military training exercise to help sand dune habitat restoration and boost biodiversity at Penhale Dunes, Cornwall

Working with Cornwall Wildlife Trust, this week The British Army will remove patches of scrub from overgrown areas of sand dunes on MOD land as part of a training exercise using JCB diggers, to give sand dune wildlife a much-needed boost.

The large dune system at Penhale is home to a wealth of native wildlife, from reptiles like common lizard and adder, to delicate orchids, the rare silver-studded blue butterfly – a favourite of nature-enthusiasts in Cornwall – and the silvery leafcutter bee, which only lives in sandy habitats. These species, like many other dune-specialists, do well in our coastal landscapes when there are plenty of areas of bare sand available for burrowing into or hunting on top of, and low grassland in which to hide or to produce flowers.

The problem that Penhale Dunes Special Area of Conservation (SAC) currently faces, much like many of the coastal dune systems in Europe, is that areas of bare sand or low grassland are becoming smaller and further apart. Fast-growing scrubby vegetation – encouraged by the loss of natural grazing, by climate change and by nitrogen increases caused by air pollution – is overtaking the landscape. As the bare sand and low grass habitat areas shrink, dune plants and animals are the first to suffer; coastal sand dunes are experiencing significant biodiversity loss.

As part of an upcoming machinery training programme, four 16-tonne military diggers will be used by the British Army's 165 Port and Maritime Regiment to remove areas of overgrown scrub and expose bare sand on Penhale's overgrown dunes.

These large excavators, often used to support major operations around the world, will be assigned a different mission; to support conservation a little closer to home.

In areas of low scrub, which have been previously cut by Cornwall Wildlife Trust, plant material will be raked out using the digger's toothed bucket. Areas of dense mature scrub like blackthorn and hawthorn, standing at over 6ft tall, will be plucked and pulled from the dunes. And, in a previously damaged area that is now home to lower plant biodiversity than the surrounding dunes, the diggers will be used to strip away the top layer of turf to expose patches of bare sand. All this will create better conditions for sand dune wildlife.

Jon Cripps, Penhale Dunes Ranger at Cornwall Wildlife Trust manages dune restoration with Dynamic DunesCAPES:

'It's fantastic that we've been able to find a way for the military's training to have a real, positive impact on the habitat here. It's a win-win-win; for Cornwall Wildlife Trust, for The Army, and for wildlife. The scrub here needs removing and by using this method we're more likely to be able to remove all the root material too, which can cause the plants to regrow.'

Removed debris will be compacted and either buried or burned on site, to stop it from growing back next year. Once The British Army have completed their work, they will be replaced by an army of

Embargoed until: 11/10/21



**Cornwall
Wildlife Trust**



volunteers, deployed to the dunes to remove any regrowth and also to monitor the site as wildlife start to use the area again.

Carolyn Cadman, Chief Executive of Cornwall Wildlife Trust, adds:

‘Sand dunes are one of the most at risk habitats in Europe, nowhere more so than in Cornwall. Pressures from development, tourism and climate change mean we need to manage them as effectively as possible. Thanks to our longstanding partnership with the Ministry of Defence we are able to work together to improve habitats at Penhale Dunes. It’s going to be really exciting to see what dune species move in once the scrub has been removed.’

Work at Penhale Dunes is taking place as part of Dynamic Dunescapes, an ambitious conservation project aiming to restore 7,000 hectares of sand dune in England and Wales, funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and EU LIFE Programme – of which Cornwall Wildlife Trust is lead partner in Cornwall.

Andy Nelson, Dynamic Dunescapes Engagement officer with Cornwall Wildlife Trust

‘We can see from historic images how much more bare sand the Penhale dune system used to have. Some of this was due to military exercises and sand extraction operations, so we don’t want to take Penhale Dunes back to the same historic percentage of bare sand cover. However, Natural England guidance suggests that because of the extensive recent vegetation growth, it needs to look a little more like it used to if our specialist wildlife is going to survive in future years.’

The planned work will take place away from sensitive areas of the dunes, during a time which is outside of many species’ breeding season, and the works areas are located just off an existing tarmac road and well-trodden path in the dunes, to minimise disturbance when using large machinery.

The work is taking place within the military training area, a part of the dunes off limits to the public. It may be visible from the section of The South West Coast Path that runs near to the work and the public are kindly asked to stay on the path.

- ends -

Jon and Andy will be available for TV / Radio / Podcast / Print interviews during week of 11/10/21. Press site visits can be facilitated.

For comment and media opportunities with Jon Cripps or Andy Nelson, contact:

Emma Brisdion, Communications Officer, Dynamic Dunescapes
emma.brisdion@naturalengland.org.uk

Adam Rush, Marketing Manager, Cornwall Wildlife Trust Adam.Rush@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk

Images:

All images are single-use only and can be downloaded here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1X9RmvXPBEqhzksL5OJck-LW_yFv7JuBD?usp=sharing



Penhale Dunes aerial image, taken 1946, displaying significantly more bare sand habitat than is present in 2021.



Google Earth image of Penhale taken in 2021 showing the extent of vegetation cover and the lack of bare sand habitat available in the dunes. This image is for non-commercial use only and usage guidelines can be found here: https://www.google.com/intl/en-GB_ALL/permissions/geoguidelines/.



Silvery leaf cutter bee photographed at Penhale Dunes in June 2021. Credit: Sally Luker, Budding Nature

Embargoed until: 11/10/21



**Cornwall
Wildlife Trust**



Jon Cripps showing Carolyn Cadman, Cornwall Wildlife Trust CEO, and Tony Juniper, Natural England Chair, some of the rare species found at Penhale Dunes which Dynamic Dunescapes is working to support. Credit: Emma Brisdion



Silver-studded blue butterfly at Penhale Dunes SAC. Credit: Emma Brisdion

Notes to editors:

About Dynamic Dunescapes

Dynamic Dunescapes is a partnership project restoring sand dunes across England and Wales for the benefit of wildlife, people and communities, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the EU LIFE Programme. Project partners are Natural England, Plantlife, National Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

The coastal dunes of England and Wales are internationally important habitats for wildlife, listed as one of the most threatened environments in Europe for biodiversity loss. These dunes are a sanctuary to rare species like the fen orchid, natterjack toad and sand lizard. But, dune management messaging, supporting dune stabilisation over many decades, has meant that dunes have become overgrown with vegetation. We now realise that this is putting protected wildlife at risk. Healthy sand dunes need to be free to move and be dynamic. Many species need areas of open sand to thrive, so this project will bring life back to the dunes by creating areas of open sand. Other specialised creatures need us to improve the dune slacks, as these often water-filled dips behind the dunes are important habitats for amphibians and birds. Invasive species will also be removed from the dunes and dune grasslands, to improve conditions for rare native plants to flourish. We work with skilled local and national experts, and involve schools and local groups, volunteers and visitors of all ages and abilities to help rejuvenate our dunes.

Embargoed until: 11/10/21



**Cornwall
Wildlife Trust**



Follow @dynamicdunes on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.