



# Ainsdale Sand Dunes

National Nature Reserve



## Welcome to Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve

Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve is one of the most important wildlife sites in England. The site was established in 1965 to protect the finest example of lime-rich sand dunes on the North West coast.

Today the National Nature Reserve allows many rare species to flourish whilst providing a place for visitors to get close to nature and enjoy the magnificent scenery of dunes, pinewoods and golden sands. It occupies the central part of the Sefton Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) a 21km long unspoilt sand dune system which stretches from Liverpool to Southport.

## A colourful history

The dunes of the Sefton Coast have been formed over many hundreds of years, with sand blown inland from the beaches and trapped by specialist coastal plants such as marram grass that can tolerate the dry, salty conditions.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries large areas of the dunes were maintained as rabbit warrens and later efforts were made to convert the poor nutrient sands into farmland, notably for asparagus farming.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in an attempt to stabilise the dunes the Formby estate landowners created pine plantations which are now a distinctive part of the local landscape.



Ainsdale panorama (dunes)



© Lynne Collins / Natural England

Rich pickings

## Beach foragers

The beach supports large numbers of wading birds throughout the autumn and winter, feeding on the rich pickings of crab, molluscs and sea urchins washed up onto the strandline.

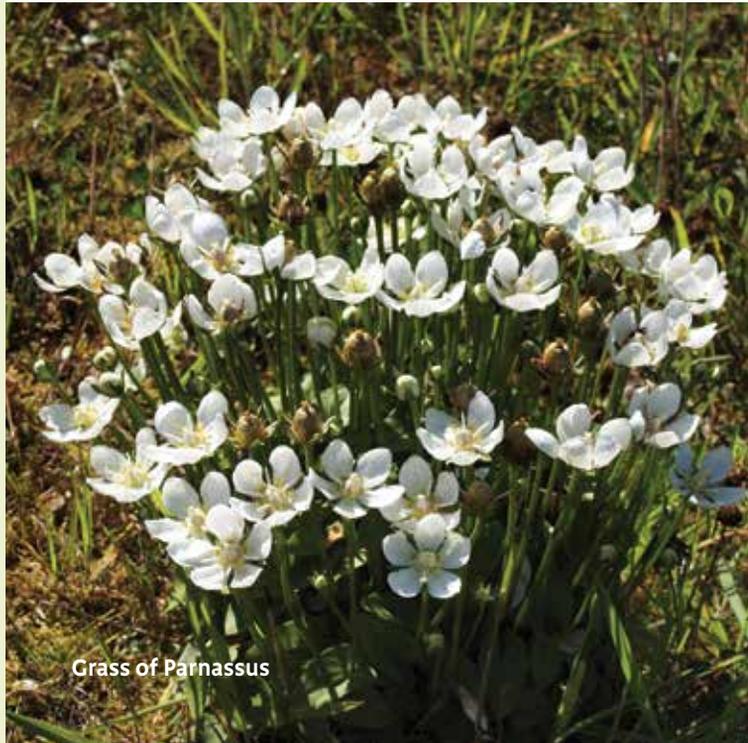
## Dune slacks

In between the ridges and dry dune grasslands are damper valleys, or dune slacks. Around 40% of Britain's dune slacks are found here on the Sefton Coast. The slacks flood in winter, providing pools for rare natterjack toads, whose distinctive call can be heard for miles around. The pools are also used by great crested newts and many dragonflies. As the pools dry up during the summer they are replaced by carpets of beautiful orchids, and other rare and interesting flowers such as seaside centaury, yellow bartsia, bog pimpnel and round leaved wintergreen.

## Dune grasslands

The dune grasslands support a wide variety of life, including spiders, grasshoppers and specialist beetles. The rabbits which graze these dunes unearth bare sand for sand lizards to lay their eggs and allowing the northern dune tiger beetle and the vernal mining bee to create their own burrows.

Plants found in these areas include biting stonecrop, sticky stork's-bill and heath dog violet, often accompanied by the caterpillar of the dark green fritillary. The very rare field gentian has the largest colony in Britain if not Europe on this reserve – look out for the purple flowers in late summer and autumn. 460 species of plants have been recorded on the NNR many of them in the open grassland habitat of the dunes and slacks.



Grass of Parnassus



© Phil Smith

Northern Dune Tiger Beetle



© Natural England

Shetland Cow

## Woodlands

The pinewoods at the landward part of the reserve provide shelter from the sea breezes and shade from the sun. The woodlands are dominated by Corsican pine, interspersed with areas of wet woodland, alder beds and scrub. The pines are home to the endearing red squirrel, and where the sunlight is able to penetrate the canopy, dune and green flowered helleborine can be found. In Autumn the fruiting bodies of fungi begin to appear, offering a fascinating new world of dead man's fingers, plums and custard and blueleg brownies!

## Managing the National Nature Reserve

Ainsdale Sand Dunes is a special place that requires careful management to ensure all of its wildlife can thrive, and all of our visitors can enjoy the very best of experiences. Natural England's work is devoted to these causes.



© Rob Woistenholme / Natural England

Field gentian



**Dune slacks flooded**

The sand dunes are grazed by Herdwick sheep over winter, along with a small number of Shetland cattle. Tree and scrub cutting is crucial to keep the dunes as open as possible for the multitude of rare plants and animals found here. Marram grass planting also takes place, just as it did 300 years ago, to help restore sand dune habitat. Much of this work is carried out by volunteers.

The rear pinewoods are managed to provide a better age structure for the cone bearing trees as a food source for the red squirrel. Our woodland operations include thinning, coppicing, creation of firebreaks and replanting. Some areas of pinewoods closest to the sea have been removed in order to restore the original dune habitats.

Looking forward, ensuring the open dunes habitats remain connected along the Sefton Coast should allow the specialist wildlife to survive and mean the dunes provide natural coastal protection in response to erosion caused by the sea.



## A place to explore

The reserve has a network of around 8 miles of footpaths marked by colour – banded posts (see map). The Woodland and Fisherman's Path are also accessible by bike, pushchairs and wheelchairs.

Away from these way marked routes visitors can feel free to explore the quieter parts of the site. In order to protect the rare and sensitive wildlife found on the reserve, we ask that dogs are kept under close control at all times, dogs are not allowed in the grazing enclosures under any circumstances.



Natterjack toad (female)

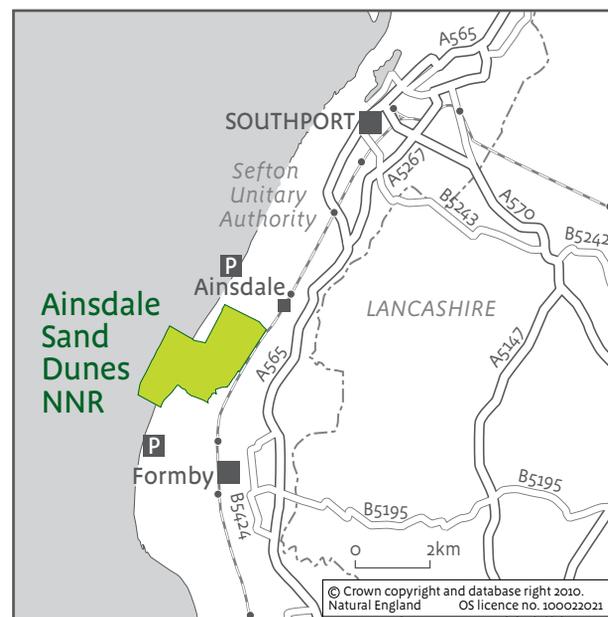
## Join us to find out more...

The NNR hosts a programme of events throughout the year, details of which can be found in the Events Guide to Sefton's Natural Coast leaflet.

There are also many ways in which you can get involved on the reserve through volunteering. We have opportunities for people to help with practical work outdoors, wildlife monitoring, education and events, and visitor management. No previous experience is required, so why not give it a go?

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## Getting here

There are footpath entrances to the reserve from Pinfold Lane and the Coastal Road, Ainsdale; Fisherman's Path, Freshfield; and from north and south along the beach and frontal dune paths. The NNR can also be visited via the Trans Pennine Trail, Sustrans Route 62, and the Sefton Coastal Footpath which provides access to the entire length of Sefton's Natural Coast.

We are a short walk away from both Ainsdale (1.2km) and Freshfield (1.4km) train stations, and local bus services stop at Freshfield station, Pinfold Lane and Gleneagles Drive.

There is no public parking on the reserve, although a limited number of disabled parking places are available (please call the reserve office for more information). Public parking can be found at Ainsdale-on-Sea beach car park, with access to the NNR via the beach or neighbouring Local Nature Reserve.

[www.merseytravel.gov.uk](http://www.merseytravel.gov.uk) or 0871 200 22 33.  
[www.sustrans.org.uk/ncn/map/route/route-62](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/ncn/map/route/route-62)  
[www.sefton.gov.uk/PDF/TSD\\_Walking\\_Cycling\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.sefton.gov.uk/PDF/TSD_Walking_Cycling_Guide.pdf)



Conifers at Ainsdale Sand Dunes

© Paul Glendell / Natural England

## Advice for visitors

Be safe, plan ahead and let someone know your plan, come prepared for the weather and wind conditions and be aware of the tide.

Respect any signs.

Beware of uneven or slippery ground and rabbit warrens.

Take all your litter home.

During dry weather conditions there is a high risk of fire. Visitors are advised not to discard cigarettes or glass bottles.

Campfires, camping and BBQs are not allowed on the reserve.

Dogs should be kept under close control preferably on a lead, they are not allowed within the fenced areas of the open dunes.

Cyclists should make way for pedestrians and reduce their speed on blind bends.

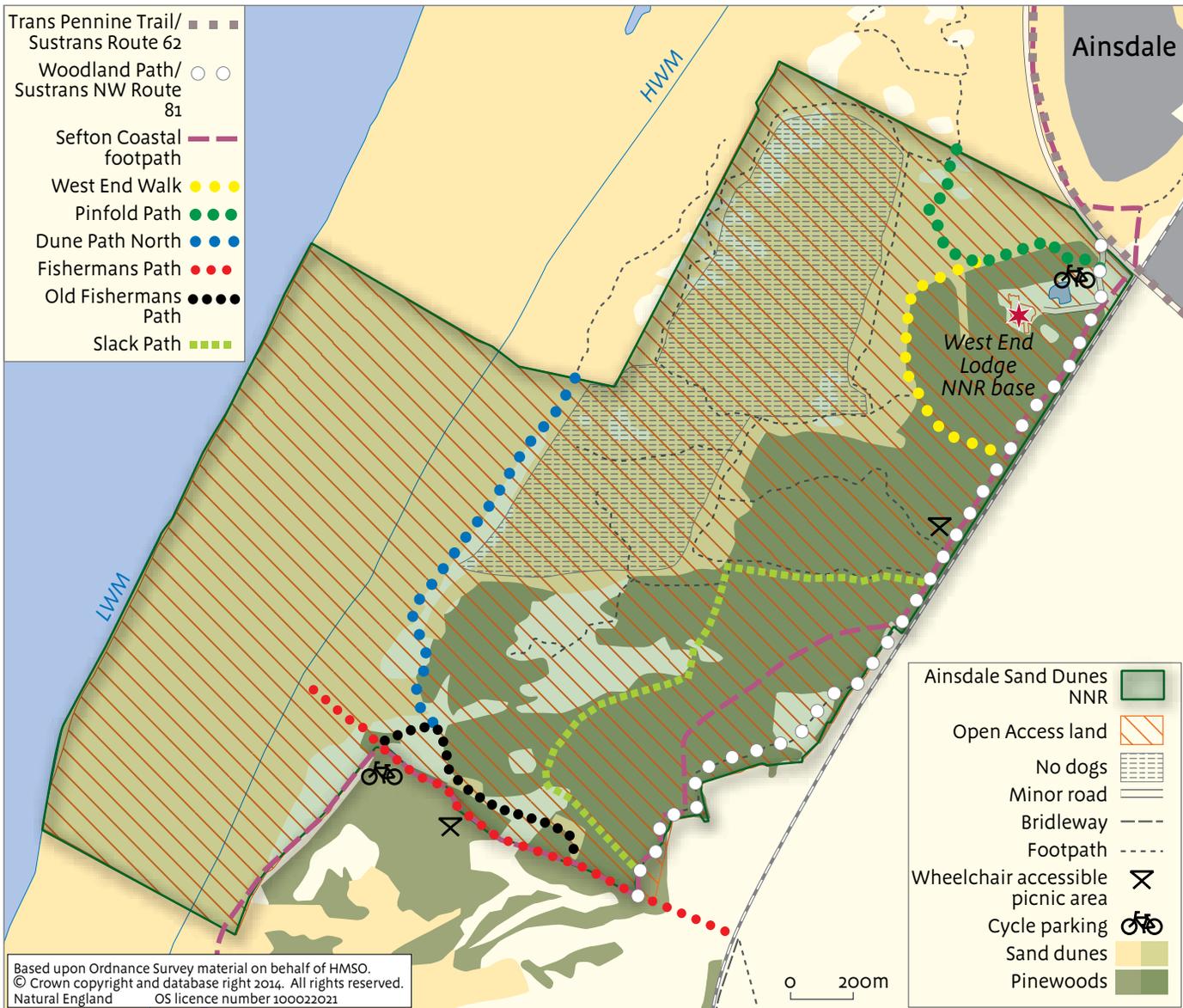
Horse riding is not permitted on the reserve except along the beach.

Further information and the local tide timetable can be found at [www.seftoncoast.org.uk](http://www.seftoncoast.org.uk)



Ruddy darter dragonfly

© Phil Smith



**Front cover photograph: Walking towards the dunes**

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