

PENHALE DUNES
Cornwall

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South-West Coast Path looking south from Holywell

There are several square miles of high sand dunes at Penhale Sands on the north Cornwall coast near Perranporth. These have a wide range of maritime flora and include some important archaeological remains. Sheltered areas between the dunes are good for Silver-studded Blues in the summer and, in the spring, you may find the rare Grizzled Skipper *ab taras*.

In 1939 a military camp was set up at Holywell and the MoD still has a large part of the northern end of the dunes fenced off. However there are vast areas of the dunes with open access. There is a National Trust car park at the northern end at Holywell and there are several lay-bys on the minor road that runs along the eastern edge of the dunes. The South-West Coast Path runs along its western edge. Penhale Dunes is now a candidate Special Area of Conservation under European rules.

TARGET SPECIES

Dingy and Grizzled Skippers, Brown Argus, Small Copper, Common Blue, Wall (all in the spring), Small Heath, Marbled White, Silver-studded Blue (later) with occasional sightings of many other species probable.

According to legend, St Piran brought Christianity to Cornwall from Ireland in the 6th century. This was the result of a lucky escape, because Piran was thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck. But the millstone turned out to be lighter than water and floated, so the wind and the waves brought Piran to Cornwall. He has subsequently become the patron saint of Cornwall and there are the remains of two ancient churches on Penhale Dunes which are both dedicated to St Piran. St Piran's Oratory is now completely covered by sand. The foundations and part of the walls of the other (later) St Piran's Church are still visible. Look for a high concrete cross towering over the dunes. The buried church is just north of the concrete cross, and the later remains are only a few hundred metres to its east.

Unfortunately the Ministry of Defence commandeered Penhale Sands in 1939 and the MoD still retains a large part of the northern end of the dunes for training purposes. However the South West Coast Path runs along the complete western boundary and there is still public access to a large area at the southern end of the dunes. Perran Sands Holiday Centre is to the south, but Penhale Sands are so extensive that there is plenty of room for everybody.

These are the highest sand dunes in Britain, 90 metres above sea level at their highest, and so extensive that it is easy to get lost. The dunes are thought to have been formed over 5,000 years ago when sand began to build up on an exposed rocky plateau. They have gradually developed ever since. Tin mining was carried out and people lived on the dune area, building their two churches and cultivating some of the land. Now, with the build-up of more wind-blown sand making people retreat, the sands provide many different dune habitats in their constantly-changing wet and dry hollows. Marram grass binds the sand together and the thin soil supports early gentians, shore dock, petalwort and scrambled-egg lichen, living alongside commoner plants like sea campion and birdsfoot trefoil. There is much to see for bird watchers: skylarks, wheatears, stonechats, sparrowhawks, peregrine falcons, sanderlings and golden plovers feed on the army of insects that inhabit the dunes.

The whole of Penhale Dunes is a candidate Special Area of Conservation because of its rare ecology and the plants and animals that live here. This means that it has been submitted to the European Commission, but not yet formally adopted, as an important high-quality conservation site covering some of the habitats and species most in need of conservation in Europe. There is particular interest in the communities of plants and insects which live in sand that has been blown inland by strong winds. The marshy pools and slacks in the northern section support many rare plants. Silverweed, common centaury and pyramidal orchids grow on the drier ground, while the damper slacks support meadowsweet, water mint, great willowherb and water horsetail. The total area of the SAC is about 2.5 square miles and it includes the land currently fenced off by the MoD so you would have to seek MoD approval to see all of it.

I went there in early May when the commonest butterfly was the Brown Argus, closely followed by the Small Copper and Common Blue, and with smaller numbers of Dingy

Skippers, Walls and Small Heaths. Later in the summer you can expect Silver-studded Blues and Marbled Whites. I had hoped to see Grizzled Skippers but didn't find any (in May 2009) although they had been reported elsewhere in the country. Those found at Penhale Dunes are unusual because quite a proportion are the *taras* aberration, which have more white patches on their upper forewings than you usually find. Why a high proportion of ab *taras* should occur here, whether because of the unusual climatic conditions on the dunes, or for some more subtle reason, no-one knows. Why I found none at all is a mystery. It may have been due to the result of the exceptionally wet winter which preceded my visit, with local flooding on the dunes, or some other unusual climatic reason or predator, or, quite possibly, it was just that my eyes were not sharp enough. Grizzled Skippers are hard to see, particularly if they are flying at low density. They shoot between flowers in a blur of their tiny, fast-moving wings and you can only positively identify them when they are stationary. There is a lot of ground to cover at Penhale Sands, but try looking in sheltered hollows where there are flowers to attract butterflies. Interestingly I was told that the best area for Grizzled Skippers is inside the fenced-off Ministry of Defence land, so try looking north-west of the two ruined churches.

A third important archaeological site, just south of Penhale Sands, is the oldest Cornish medieval amphitheatre, the Perran Round. This is on the edge of the tiny village of Rose. Although Perran Round is now an open-air theatre, it may have been adapted in medieval times from an Iron Age or Roman enclosure, so it has certainly been here for a very long time. In plan view, the Round is a perfect circle with a raised bank all round the circle and with two diametrically-opposed entrances cut through the bank. The turf inside the circle is flat except for a hollow depression in the shape of a frying pan. This is thought to have been used to represent hell! Cornish miracle plays are performed here from time to time and the Round has become an iconic site for the Cornish identity and language. It is now in the care of the St Piran Trust, supported by the Cornwall County Council.



Holywell beach at the northern end of Penhale Sands



Babington's (wild) leeks at the National Trust's Holywell car park



Footpath sign at Holywell car park



Ministry of Defence notice. Only the northern part of the dunes are used by the MoD



Small Coppers can be present in large numbers in a good season



Grizzled Skippers are always localised and may be rare in a poor season



Walls fly throughout the dunes. Look for them settling briefly on warm surfaces



Typical sandy dune and surrounding vegetation. Look for sheltered pathways between the dunes



The extent of flooded areas depends on winter rainfall



St Piran's cross marked the boundary between ancient ownership rights



Foundations of the second St Piran's church on Penhale Sands. It was abandoned in 1804



St Piran's Oratory, the original church of St Piran, is now buried under the sand



Entrance to Perran Round



Concrete cross near the remains of St Piran's Oratory



The Devil's frying pan in Perran Round



Skylarks in the dunes



Brown Argus at Penhale Sands in May



Perran Round from further away



Typical sheltered duneland habitat



Another view of typical duneland habitat



Dingy Skipper (f) at Penhale Sands



Dingy Skipper (m) at Penhale Sands



Path across the dunes



Path to Holywell sands

GOD THE FATHER (translation of the opening of a Cornish mystery play performed at Perran Round)

I am called the Father of Heaven, creator of everything that is made. We are truly Three in One, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and today I desire by My power to start the world. Heaven and earth, I say, let them be formed according to my judgement.

Now that Heaven is created for us and filled with angels bright, we will create the earth in as much as we are Three and One, the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Surely, most royally are these made as we ourselves would have them.

LOCATION

Explorer Map 104: Redruth & St Agnes
Landranger (pink) Map 200: Newquay,
Bodmin and Surrounding Area

Penhale Dunes are at Perran Bay, immediately north of Perranporth, on the north shore of Cornwall. They are about 5 miles SW of Newquay. There is a National Trust car park at Holywell at the northern end of the sands at SW767587 and there are lay-bys on the minor road from Perranporth to Cubert along the eastern edge of the reserve at SW774553 and SW783567. Refreshments are available at Perranporth and Holywell and at the Smugglers Den Inn at Trebellan which is a hamlet south of Cubert at SW789571. The pathways through the dunes are in the main easy for walking but regrettably there is no provision for the disabled. Perran Round (the ancient circular amphitheatre) is close to the dunes in the village of Rose at SW778545. Again there is no disabled access but good views can be obtained from a car. Do allow enough time because distances over the dunes are quite large and it is easy to get lost.