

# Braunton Burrows

## Guide and Map

*Journey to the heart  
of the Biosphere...*



Included inside:



I-Spy



Burrows Map



Circular Walks



# An Introduction

Braunton Burrows is one of the largest sand dune systems in the British Isles and is privately owned by the Trustees of the Christie Estate. It is at the heart of the **North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)** and a **UNESCO** designated Biosphere reserve, with a rich diversity of plant and animal life.

Recognised as a **Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**, Braunton Burrows is a wild expanse, approximately 1,000 hectares in size. It is located to the north of the Taw and Torridge estuary and flanked by Saunton Sands, a stretch of sandy beach that is 5.6 km in length.

This landscape comprises of dunes (high ground), slacks (low ground), grassy plains, dense scrub and ponds. Within the Burrows, there are more than 470 species of flowering plants, including 11 species of orchids alone.

It is also home to a wide range of fauna - an abundance of insects that includes 33 species of butterfly, many nesting birds and 5 of the 6 reptile species found in the UK. A beautiful place to enjoy year round, the Burrows is particularly vibrant from the end of May to August, when many of the open dunes are covered with a spectacular carpet of flowers.



Bee Orchid



Partridge Slack.



Summer flowers in bloom.

# Habitats

The Braunton Burrows sand dune system contains a variety of unique habitats which are home to a diverse range of plants and flowers (flora), and birds and animals (fauna). Here is a glossary of other useful ecological terms:

## Strandline / Foredunes -

The strandline is the zone on the beach just above the high water mark where plants can establish themselves. Foredunes are low ridges where sand blown from the beach begins to stabilise. Much like in a desert only long rooted plants can survive, by tapping into water sources far below the surface, such as the coarse Marram grass whose roots can extend over 5 metres underground to anchor it in the loose sand.



A view over the dunes.

## Dry Dunes

These are the higher dunes and sandy ridges found further inland where the sand is stabilised. Still desert-like, the sand is more compact and sustains a surprising variety of annual and biennial (flowering every 2 years) plants. Colourful herbs and mosses grow in the dune turf areas, which are cropped short by rabbits.

## Dune Slacks

Between the ridges and the high dunes are flat areas and dips in the landscape, known as slacks. Over time, these have been carved out of the dunes by the wind and in winter they can flood, but dry out in the summer providing a home to a wide range of spectacular plants.

## Blow Out

This refers to dune erosion, where there are no plants to stabilise the sand and a dune becomes hollowed out by the wind. Flagpole Dune in Zone 2 is the most impressive example of a blow out in action.

## Succession

This term refers to the gradual replacement of one plant community by another, through natural processes and over time. It begins with a few pioneering plants (such as Marram grass) and develops in complexity until it becomes a more stable climax community supporting a different range of plants and animals. Walking across the dunes is like walking through time, seeing these succession stages.



# I-Spy



2  
points

**Viper's Bugloss (*summer*)**  
Found in dune slacks



3  
points

**Evening Primrose (*summer*)**  
Found in dry dunes



3  
points

**Sharp Rush (*all year*)**  
Found in dune slacks



10  
points

**Adder (*spring/summer*)**  
Found in dune slacks/dry dunes



2  
points

**Common Blue butterfly (*spring/summer*)**  
Found all over



3  
points

**Burnet moth (*summer*)**  
Found all over



3  
points

**Sea Holly (*spring/summer*)**  
Found in foredunes



2  
points

**Birds-foot Trefoil (*spring/summer*)**  
Found in dune slacks



1  
point

**Marram Grass (*all year*)**  
Found in foredunes/dry dunes



1  
point

**Rabbit (*all year*)**  
Found in dune slacks



6  
points

**Buzzard (*all year*)**  
Found up high



3  
points

**Poplar leaf beetle (*spring/summer*)**  
Found in dune slacks

**How did you do?**  
Add your points up here



# Map of Burrows walks



Saunton Beach offers the most convenient Burrows beach access, with short walks to be enjoyed in Zone 1. The following circular walks take place in Zone 2 (via Sandy Lane car park) and Zone 3 (via Broad Sands car park, which is accessed by the Crow Point toll road).

The Burrows is criss-crossed by vehicle tracks and pathways. For navigation purposes, Northern Boundary Track runs from Sandy Lane to the beach along the perimeter of Zone 1 and 2. J-Lane runs from the American Road to the beach along the perimeter of Zone 2 and 3 (*Caution: be aware of military vehicles*).



## Nature Walk

On this walk you will see various habitats and beach.

Difficulty: Easy

Time: 1.5 hours (*Circular*)

- Enter the bridleway from **Sandy Lane car park**, located to the left of the map board, and enter Zone 2 via the kissing gate (to the left of the notice board).
- Before long you will see the impressive Flagpole Dune ahead. Walk up and through its middle, passing the flagpole base that once sat at the top of this *dry dune*. Over the years, through the process of *blow out*, it has become hollowed out with the sand shifting inland up to 6 metres per year.
- Exit from the bottom of the dune and turn right onto the sandy track. Walk through the slack, past Dune Pond on your left (marked by a white post) and bear left, joining the sandy track that goes uphill.
- At the top, join the main track and walk down the other side, towards the sea. At the bottom, cross Pine Slack, over the vehicle track, and up the sandy path on the other side.
- The path weaves its way into Partridge Slack, with its ponds supporting an abundance of amphibious based flora and fauna.
- Carry on towards the pole sticking up in the near distance. Cross the stile and walk through the *foredunes* to the beach.
- Turn right and walk for 5 minutes or so until you reach the track that heads right, back into the foredunes and to a gate / kissing gate.
- Pass through and take the track that leads straight on (following the fence line). This is The Northern Boundary Track and will take you all the way back to the car park. Following the fence line, the track undulates up and down for 20 minutes or so, and then leaves the fence and veers to the right.
- Presently, you will see Flagpole Dune once more. Follow the track round to the left and retrace your footsteps back to **Sandy Lane car park**.



Flagpole Dune.



Look out for plants along the way.

## History & Nature Walk

On this walk you will see various habitats, beach and history.

Difficulty: Easy - moderate

Time: 1.5 hours (*Circular*)

- Follow the path from **Broadsands car park**, past the notice board until you reach a crossroads and take the wooden boardwalk. Follow this all the way to the beach, passing through *dry dune pasture*, damp *dune slacks* and *foredunes*.
- On the beach, turn right and walk past the ruins of the old lighthouse. Walk for 10 minutes or so before turning inland on a path that cuts between the dunes (and is an illustration of a blow out in action). This is marked by a white post.
- Cross the stile to the left of the gate and enter Zone 3. Now in Shingle Slack, follow the path in a straight line before kinking to the right and heading past a large mound/hillock.
- On the other side follow the vehicle track across the slack and take the sandy track upwards on the other side which cuts over the top of Southern Bluff.
- Over the brow, search out a loose path to your right and climb to the top of the ridge. Follow a path over the spine of the ridge and admire the views; Braunton to your left, Barnstaple straight on, Yelland and Instow on the opposite side of the river and Appledore and Westward Ho! to your right.
- At the next grassy vehicle track you come to, pause to peer down on Twayblade Slack to your right. This formed part of the 'Assault Training Center', where GIs practised assaulting pillboxes and obstacles ahead of the D-Day landings.
- Turn left and follow the track down the hill and through the middle concrete 'landing craft' (an ATC training relic). On the other side, turn right and follow the track to the gate.
- Cross the stile and turn right onto the uneven 'American Road'. After a few minutes you will find yourself at the boardwalk. Turn left and retrace your footsteps to **Broadsands car park**.



WW2 mock landing craft in Zone 3.



Viper's Bugloss.



# Management

As a site of great ecological importance Branton Burrows is managed by the Christie Estate in conjunction with **Natural England**. Both work closely with partners including **North Devon Coast AONB** and the **North Devon Biosphere Reserve** to manage and conserve this range of dune habitats.

To do this, the Burrows needs careful land management to allow the abundant flora and fauna to thrive. This is achieved through a variety of measures, from mechanised scrub clearance to grazing the site with livestock, which keeps scrub levels down. In the past, a larger rabbit population kept the grass levels and scrub seedlings cropped.



Devon Red cattle.



Devon Red mother and calf.

Left to grow unchecked scrub, such as brambles and Sea Buckthorn, would soon result in the Burrows becoming overgrown, smothering wild flower growth and making it impenetrable for users who enjoy strolling through its open spaces.

The aim of land management is to support the rich bio-diversity and allow the many different Burrows habitats to flourish. The long term goal is to reach a stage where the

Burrows is made up of 10 - 15% bare sand (in the 1940s and 1950s bare sand made up over 50% of the site).

The Burrows is also used by the **Ministry of Defence** for training exercises involving troop and vehicle manoeuvres. While this may appear counter intuitive on a site of ecological interest, controlled use of vehicles to churn up pathways and brush can make a positive contribution by clearing space for our rarer flowers and plants to grow.

More information about the Burrows and its wildlife can be found at **The Countryside Centre**, located in the centre of Branton.



Grazing and mechanised clearance controls the scrub.

# History

Branton Burrows is privately owned by the Christie Estate which welcomes members of the public to make use of the space. The Burrows takes its name from rabbits, introduced in Norman times, which for many years kept the vegetation in check.

In the past, the Estate employed three full time rabbit catchers, who sent their catch to market in London, 2 - 3 times a week. However, as time went on they were seen as a pest and in the mid Twentieth century the rabbit population was decimated by Myxomatosis, to the detriment of the Burrows flora - the reason why it now needs managed grazing.

Negotiating the waters of Bideford Bay was a perilous exercise in the days before navigational aids. Over the years Crow Point, which overlooks the Taw and Torridge Estuary, has been home to a lifeboat station and a lighthouse, the ruins of which you can still see today.



Troops training at the Assault Training Center.



Perhaps the most significant era in the Burrows history occurred in 1943 - 1944, when it was chosen as the site for the 'Assault Training Center'. This was a facility for training over 10,000 American troops ahead of the D-Day landings, most of whom were billeted in nearby Branton.

Within the dunes, GIs practised with weapons including rockets

and bazookas, and learnt tactics for

overcoming obstacles such as 'Czech Hedgehogs' and heavily armed pill boxes which they would encounter on the beaches of Normandy. Saunton beach was used to train the troops for amphibious landings.

Remnants of these training facilities can still be seen in the Burrows, including the rocket firing range wall in Zone 2 (near Grand Canyon Dune) and three mock landing craft in Zone 3 (near the boardwalk at Crow Point). The road which runs on the Burrows eastern flank, was laid by the troops and is still known as 'The American Road'.



Rabbits have played a key role in the history of the Burrows.

# Do's and Don'ts

While the Christie Estate welcomes public access, it does request that users respect that right by following a few simple guidelines.

- **Do keep your dog under control!** The Burrows is divided into 3 zones (1,2 and 3), and at various times livestock will be grazing in one or two of these zones. Dog owners are requested to keep their dogs under close control at all times and on a lead around livestock. Follow guidelines set out on signs and on the dedicated Facebook page.
- **Do pick up your waste!** Litter, especially plastics, poses a danger to livestock and native wildlife. Dog waste spreads disease that can affect humans and livestock.
- **Don't pick flowers!** Remember the Burrows is a UNESCO biosphere. Flowers and plants look most beautiful where you find them growing naturally.
- **Do shut gates!** Livestock can escape and cause injury to themselves or pose a risk to the public.
- **Don't touch military debris!** The Burrows is used as a military training area (including the use of vehicles and pyrotechnics). Use caution and don't touch or remove debris.

## Useful Information

### Getting There

**On foot/bus:** From Braunton, walkers can follow the South West Coast Path (which connects with the Tarka Trail) or catch a bus to Saunton Sands beach.

**By car/bicycle:** There are 3 car parks with access to the Burrows which are marked on the booklet map. These are *Saunton Beach* (with facilities and best beach access), *Sandy Lane* (in the heart of the Burrows) and *Broadsands* (accessed via the Toll Road to Crow Point).

### Online Information

For the latest news and updates, including grazing zone status for dog walkers, please check the **Braunton Burrows Public Information** page on **Facebook**. 

For general information, please view the Braunton Burrows section on [www.christieestates.co.uk](http://www.christieestates.co.uk) or visit [www.explorebraunton.org](http://www.explorebraunton.org) for info on self-guided trails.

To find out more about North Devon Coast AONB (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) visit [www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk](http://www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk). The **Countryside Centre** in Braunton is a valuable educational resource, providing information, displays and free guided walks in the summer ([www.brauntoncountrysidecentre.org](http://www.brauntoncountrysidecentre.org)).

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