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# **Environmental Management at St Andrews Links**

By Bob Taylor

Head of The Sports Turf Research Institute  
(Ecology and Environment Department)





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**Mr Taylor is responsible for carrying out the ecology audits on all the Open Championship courses on behalf of the R & A as well as doing a similar task on some of the other golf course used for their main events such as the Open qualifying, Amateur championships etc.**

The dunes and associated grasslands into which the seven golf courses have been introduced not only provide important recreation for the people of St Andrews and the many visitors attracted to the area, but are also a very rich environment for birds, small mammals (including brown hare) and many different plant species that can be found. The playing surfaces should never be considered in isolation, they are an integral component of the site and only as important as the environment itself. How much pleasure would be lost if the game of golf was to be played in bland surroundings.



Brown Hare

There is no singular component of the Links that is more important than any other. The Links are important because of the mosaic and diversity of habitat, which in culmination will significantly increase the nature conservation importance of the site. The greater the diversity of habitats the greater will be the wildlife interest. In turn this will indirectly and imperceptibly benefit the enjoyment of those using the courses.



Habitat mosaic

Also important and something that generally goes hand-in-hand with the wildlife is the geology and topography, something that is easily lost without appropriate management as taller and more scrubby vegetation takes over. The recreation, golf, wildlife and topographical issues must all be considered by the greenstaff who are collectively responsible for the practical work for the long-term management of the Links. Their input over the past 10 years or so has largely been directed by STRI who has produced Management Plans covering the different areas for each of the courses.

Without management there would be a gradual loss of the important dune grassland and associated areas of heather as species such as gorse take over. The dominance of gorse will lead to a loss of the dune topography and a marked reduction in ecological value. In time this could lead to the exclusion of some species, i.e. those such as skylark, meadow pipit and brown hare, and an increase in others such as chaffinch, yellowhammer and linnet. Therefore, the ultimate aim of management must be to retain a diversity of habitats for the benefit of many different species of wildlife rather than just a few.



Yellowhammer



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## Gorse

Gorse is recognised as an important feature of the links but one which at some point requires a degree of management intervention, for example the gorse in particular will become leggy and degenerate without management, losing its capacity to regenerate. Coppicing the gorse on a periodic basis will ensure that the gorse retains its juvenility to perpetuity. As the gorse ages, it will become open and lose some of its interest for bird species. It will be important to retain structural variation within the different stands of gorse over the site, i.e. young to old.

In some areas, the gorse is spreading outwards into areas of heather or into the dune grasslands. This is a natural process (often termed succession) that will lead to a marked change in the underlying conditions and a loss of the habitat in which it is moving in to. Furthermore and from a golfing perspective, gorse if left will affect sightlines, prevent spectator vantage and restrict access. Therefore, there is a need to contain the spread of gorse through physical removal on a selective and ongoing basis.

As it competes for light, gorse will grow and hide the natural topography of the dunes resulting in one bland, overall height, rather than the more interesting skyline that the dune grasses such as marram and sea lyme would give. From a golfing point of view, there are many occasions where gorse is important and you have to continually question things such as a) Is it historically important b) Is it visually important or c) Is it strategically important.



Strong regeneration following coppicing



Losing sightlines



Historically important gorse

## Bare sand

Management will bring about a number of indirect benefits, one of the main being a marked increase in bare sand. This is a vital habitat and one that is important for the overall ecological functioning of the links. As gorse and the underlying trash/debris is removed, an underlying clean sand will be exposed. This will provide areas for birds to dust themselves, for reptiles like the common lizard to bask, and mining bees and wasps to burrow. Bare sand will allow more sensitive plant species to colonise, providing colour and interest before the more competitive species once again take over.

Inevitably with succession, gorse will eventually re-invade in an attempt to reinstate a dominant climax community at the expense of all others and this therefore means that the greenstaff can never rest easy. Returning to areas on a cyclical basis will be vital if the aims and objectives set out in the management plans are to be realised.



Bare sand



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## Heather

Heather is important on the links but has over time reduced in extent through trampling pressures and a gradual encroachment of the surrounding grasses and gorse:

Heather is compromised by trampling pressures and will be more susceptible to the competitive effects the encroaching grasses. Management should involve periodic cordoning, appropriate communication, relaxed cutting and weed control.

Management must work towards reducing competition from grasses to open up the areas of heather and encourage its expansion. On the links, this is undertaken by turf stripping, scarification, returfing and reseeding work.

## Grasslands

The grasslands over the links vary considerably given the degree of management. These range from the amenity grasslands through the playing areas to the wider unmanaged fixed dune grasslands where marram is still an important component. It is the range and diversity of grasslands that is so important for wildlife. All areas have value for different bird species. Pied wagtail, starling, rook, meadow pipit and skylark will all use the playing surfaces for feeding, whilst nesting will be confined to the more out of play zones.

The St. Andrews Links Trust recognises the need to maintain diversity of grassland conditions without conflicting with golf.

The marginal rough for example provides a buffer between the fairways and the more off-line areas. It is managed via infrequent cutting to maintain a thin sward that will enable ball retrieval and onward play, indirectly it will extend the area of available rough for wildlife.

Management to maximise habitats for wildlife and a thriving environment for golf is not something that is unique to St. Andrews, it is being practised widely from Royal Birkdale to Royal St. Georges, from Carnoustie to Royal Troon and indeed further afield.

Management must be directed, appropriate and ongoing and St. Andrews is an exemplar of what can be achieved with committed, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff. One of the hardest tasks the greenstaff face is to get season ticket holders and visitors alike on board and this relies on communication in all its guises.



Gorse encroaching into heather



Heather is weakened by foot traffic



Grassland



Meadow pipit



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We hope that this short presentation goes some way to showing that the management of the St. Andrews links is considered, directed and focussed to achieving important conservation and golfing gains.