

the arrival of the beachgrass, such wetlands might have come and gone, covered and uncovered by the moving dunes, but now they are fixed.

Behind the plane are the dunes — impressive mounds of sand that almost feel like someone has taken piece of the Sahara and imported it somewhere colder and wetter. That is when the dunes have not been overcome by the grasses.

One easy and odd place to see the towering dunes is behind the Fred Meyer off Highway 101 in Florence. The dunes loom behind the store and sometimes creep over the fence. It's a strange clash of the wild sand with the modern world that finds it so inconvenient.

There are often lonely islands of trees among those coastal dunes. Pavlis explains that at one point sand stopped moving in, and the uplift created a cliff that allowed a forest to grow. Eventually the sand moved in and covered it, leaving ghostly trees in its wake after it again moves on.

But those expanses of open sand have become few and far between. Forests have begun to grow on the once shifting sand, and they are no longer getting covered over. Other invasives such as gorse and Scotch broom have moved in, Pavlis says.

The dunes, freed of beachgrass, are powerful. "Lakes on maps are usually round or oval," she says, "but dunes lakes have fingers and arms because they once were mountain valleys." The dunes stemmed the streams running out of the mountain foothills.

Some of what is being lost is hard to see — literally. Pink sand verbena, a wildflower that grows only in open sand, is a federal species of concern. Grey beach pea is also declining, as are seashore bluegrass and sand fescue, which grow in the exact opposite of the habitat European beachgrass creates, preferring unstable sand.

The dunes' insular blue butterfly is declining, and the Western snowy plover is threatened throughout its range.

Finally, the rare Siuslaw hairy-necked tiger beetle can be found in dunes habitat. According to the Xerces Society,

tiger beetles, known for chasing down their prey, are the fastest insects on the planet.

IN THE BEGINNING

Sarah Peters remembers her first trip out to the dunes, at least 15 years ago. New to Oregon, she went out to Tahkenitch Dunes, hiked and camped and fell in love.

Now, Peters says, those same dunes she saw are covered in European beachgrass.

In 2009, while she was working with conservation group Wildlands CPR, Peters was part of a lawsuit against the Forest Service that sought to stop construction of a road that would lead to more off-road vehicle (also known as off-highway vehicles or OHVs) use on the Oregon Dunes. She wrote a blog, she says, about how, although off-road vehicle management was needed, the real issue was invasive species.

Thanks to the way the blog was set up, Peters didn't see that a man named Jody Phillips, an avid OHV user, had responded in the comments section. Six months later, when she saw the comment, Peters reached out to Phillips, asking to see if he was still open to a chat.

Phillips remembers it as well. He was fighting to keep the dunes open to OHV riders, who relish the open sand. From his perspective, when you close the dunes off to the riders, "you are trying to stop the only people trying to get rid of the grass."

When it comes to saving the dunes, he adds, "It's an Oregonian issue that we are losing a national treasure, not an environmentalist or rider issue."

So Peters and Phillips had coffee. And went out on the dunes, both hiking and in one of Phillips' vehicles, and began to hatch a plan to save the dunes. "This is never going to go anywhere," Peters thought, "but let's give it a shot."

They set up a meeting with Jerry Ingersoll, then the forest supervisor of the Siuslaw National Forest, and the

Oregon Dunes Restoration Collaborative was launched.

Peters is no longer active with the collaborative; Chandra LeGue of Oregon Wild is working with the group instead. Like Peters, LeGue has skepticism about OHVs but also sees the benefits of the unlikely partnerships of the collaborative.

Phillips says, "We are just concerned people, and people willing to set differences aside."

Phillips still wants to keep the dunes accessible to off-road vehicles. Peters still says that OHVs don't belong in areas of sensitive species habitat.

But the bigger problem, they say, is not having the dunes at all.

RESTORATION TAKES MANY SHAPES

Collaboration has been around for a while, says Jane Kertis. She's an area ecologist with the Forest Service's Northwest Oregon Ecology Program. The Siuslaw National Forest in particular has been involved in collaborative effort. For the dunes, Kertis says, "it's a way for folks to rally around a common goal of restoration."

Kertis says, "Beachgrass is very good at its job and very difficult to get rid of — it's unrealistic to get rid of." In fact, she says, in some places it's still being planted. If all the beachgrass were to be removed, you'd again be facing problems such as the dunes creeping across Highway 101. Instead, the collaborative has come up with a three-part strategy.

The first is to preserve the best parts of the dunes. "Some areas function pretty well right now," Kertis says, with open, wind-blown sand and have native vegetation.

Next, "restore site-specific conditions and processes," or, in other words, focus on small areas that might have particularly good snowy plover habitat and need a little help.

Part three, Kertis says, is to restore landscape-scale natural processes. "One of the biggest issues is that we have

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