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The Trust is set to embark on an ambitious project to help safeguard the future of one of our rarest amphibians - the natterjack toad - at our Red Rocks nature reserve on the Wirral.

The Red Rocks, adjacent to the Royal Liverpool Golf Course, include almost 20 acres of sand dunes, wetlands and reedbeds, and provide a home for the natterjack – found nowhere else across Cheshire and Wirral.

From February, the designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), will see major works to improve and enhance areas of the nature reserve crucial to the natterjack's survival.

The news comes as the Trust recently secured a new management agreement that will see more of the charity's only coastal reserve under direct protection than at any point in its history.

The loudest amphibian in the UK - thanks to its gurgling calls in the mating season, the natterjack toad is restricted to mainly coastal areas in the North West, East Anglia and heathlands in parts of the West Midlands and down across the Home Counties.

The heart of the programme will see more than 40 square metres of new wetlands for natterjack toads

At the heart of the programme will be the creation of over 40 square metres of new pools and improvements to existing wetland areas or 'slacks' within the reserve that the toads favour.

Along with natterjack toads, the reserve is **also a key migration stopover point for birds arriving in the UK in spring and autumn, and boasts an impressive list of rarities**, along with breeding species like skylarks and reed warblers.

A key habitat for these migratory and rare birds which 'stopover' was the stand of poplar trees, now felled. Far fewer birds will now 'stopover' – migratory birds are cited for SSSI.

Another key aspect to the changes will be limiting the impact of scrub and small trees which are encroaching into the reserve and have the potential to interfere with the natural processes that see dunes forming naturally.

One of the biggest problems facing the Wildlife Trust is the loss of the typical open sandy areas that demonstrate the dune habitat is in the most optimum condition for the species that usually thrive there.

To help maintain this, some areas of soil and vegetation will be removed to expose the sand below, with typical dune plants like marram grass being reinstated to help reduce wind speed and trap sand within the dunes as would naturally occur. **Invasive non-native species such as willowherb and an aggressive form of ground rose will also be controlled to limit their impact on more delicate native dune flora.**

What aggressive form of ground rose? Are any non-native willowherb species found in the dunes? There are native species of willowherb present on the reserve.

The plans have been approved by the UK's conservation agency, Natural England, who have also funded the work at the reserve which will continue year-on-year.

Matt Allmark, reserves officer with the Cheshire & Wirral Wildlife Trust who will be overseeing the works said: *"We understand when people see diggers and machinery heading onto a much-loved wildlife area that alarm bells might ring, however on this occasion it's all for a good cause.*

*"The nature of the changes we're making in conjunction with Natural England may look quite stark to begin with, however our aim is to achieve **the right balance for these delicate dunes which has been lost in recent years.***

Where is the evidence that the flora in the dunes has changed significantly since 1979?

*"Along with the natterjack toads, Red Rocks is home to a number of regionally rare plants and wildlife, and **with the impact of non-native species** it's sometimes necessary for us to lend a hand in redressing the right balance of habitats.*

What non-native species? Extensive searches have revealed only a minimal number which are having a minimal effect but would be easily eradicated.

"Our hope is that these works will help to secure a nature reserve that will continue to be home to natterjack toads and more for years to come."

The works are expected to begin in February and during this time some areas of the reserve will have restricted access when machinery is operating.

COMMENTS IN RED BY Richard Smith