

COUNTY: SOMERSET

SITE NAME: CROOK PEAK TO SHUTE  
SHELVE HILL

DISTRICT: SEDGEMOOR

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)

Local Planning Authority: SEDGEMOOR DISTRICT COUNCIL, SOMERSET  
COUNTY COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: ST 385555 to ST 430560      Area: 332.2 (ha) 820.9 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 182      1:10,000: ST35: NE, SE  
ST45: NW, SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1952      Date of Last Revision: 1972

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Formerly known as Crook Peak. Site boundary amended by extension. Part Common Land. Part Nature Conservation Review Site. Within the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Biological

This site comprises a wide range of habitats which includes ancient and secondary semi-natural broadleaved woodland, unimproved calcareous grassland and a complex mosaic of calcareous grassland and acidic dry dwarf-shrub heath. Four of the calcareous grassland communities, two of the woodland types and the calcareous grassland/acidic dry dwarf-shrub heath mosaic all have a restricted distribution in Britain. Four nationally rare and seven notable plant species are also present.

The hills between Crook Peak and Shute Shelve occupy steep south-facing slopes of the Mendips. A number of deeply dissected valleys have formed and these provide a wide range of slopes and aspects. The area is underlain by Black Rock Limestone, Clifton Down Limestone and Burrington Oolite strata of the Carboniferous Limestone Series. In many places weathering of these strata has resulted in the formation of immature calcareous soils. In contrast more acid soils derived in large part from windblown silt (loess) originating from outside the Mendips, are also present.

The localised variations in climatic, edaphic and management factors have led to the development of a wide range of plant communities. The shallowest calcareous soils support a community characterised by Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* and Carline Thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, with the nationally rare Somerset Grass *Koeleria vallesiana* and Honewort *Trinia glauca*. Communities on deeper calcareous soils are characterised by (i) Sheep's Fescue and Meadow Oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* with Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* and Fairy Flax *Linum catharticum* or (ii) Tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* with Glaucous Sedge *Carex flacca* and Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*. Less base-rich soils support a community characterised by Sheep's Fescue, Mouse-ear Hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella* and Wild Thyme *Thymus praecox* with the notable *Potentilla tabernaemontani*. Other plants of interest include the nationally rare Cheddar Pink *Dianthus gratianopolitanus* and the Bedstraw *Galium fleurotii*; and the notable Dwarf Sedge *Carex humilis* and Dwarf Mouse-ear *Cerastium pumilum*.

A complex mosaic of unimproved calcareous grassland and acidic dry dwarf-shrub heath also occurs. Species typical of calcareous grassland include Meadow Oat-grass, Sheep's Fescue, Glaucous Sedge, Dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, Common Rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* and Wild Thyme. Heath species such as Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, Bell Heather *Erica cinerea* and Western Gorse *Ulex gallii* are well represented and Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* is often locally dominant.

Rose Wood and King's Wood are ancient woodland sites. Two main woodland types can be distinguished: (i) Field Maple-Ash – Small-leaved Lime and (ii) Hazel-Ash. Canopy species include Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur*, Small-leaved Lime *Tilia cordata* and Whitebeam *Sorbus aria*. Wild Service-tree *Sorbus torminalis* is restricted to Rose Wood. The understorey is dominated by Hazel *Corylus avellana* with some Field Maple *Acer campestre* and Guelder-rose *Viburnum opulus*. Ground flora species include Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* and Meadow Saffron *Colchicum autumnale*. The nationally rare Purple Gromwell *Lithospermum purpureocaeruleum* occurs at Rose Wood.

Secondary woodland of Ash, Wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana*, Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* is developing on many areas of the hills.

Greater Horseshoe Bats *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* have been recorded in recent years.

#### Geological

There are cave deposits of interest at the southern end of Crook Peak. Picken's Hole is of considerable importance because of its clear well-stratified sequence of deposits and faunas, all dating from within the Devensian. The rich Layer 3 fauna, Carbon 14 date 34,265 (+2600/–1950) years BP, which includes spotted hyaena, lion, arctic fox, mammoth, woolly rhino, horse, reindeer, suslik and northern vole *Microtus oeconomus*, is a major source of information for this phase of the Middle Devensian. It is also the most carefully excavated hyaena-den site and assemblage from Britain.