

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE

SITE NAME: BRIMSDOWN HILL

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

Local Planning Authorities: West Wiltshire District Council, Salisbury District Council, Wiltshire County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 831385, ST 838387      Area: 193.7 (ha.) 478.6 (ac.)  
ST 853377

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183      1:10,000: ST 83 NW, NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951      Date of Last Revision: 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Part of the site is subject to a management agreement with the Nature Conservancy Council under Section 15 of the Countryside Act, 1968. The site lies within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Brimsdown Hill SSSI is an extensive area of botanically rich calcareous grassland, scrub and woodland, with adjacent acidic types. It exhibits a close intermix of declining chalk habitats and contains uncommon plants including one or nationally restricted distribution.

The site lies on the western edge of Salisbury Plain and occupies an Upper Chalk plateau, surrounded by Middle Chalk slopes on many aspects. Typical thin chalk soils occur on the slopes while the plateau supports soils of a more acidic nature.

The majority of the site is well grazed chalk grassland, with sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* and glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* widespread, as are the herbs horseshoe vetch *Ilippocrepis comosa* and chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*. Heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, betony *Stachys officinalis* and saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria* also occur, a group of species with a strikingly western distribution when growing on chalk soils. Further flowering plants present include frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera*, autumn lady's-tresses *Spiranthes spiralis* and the nationally restricted bastard-toadflax *Thesium humifusum*.

On the more acidic soils, grassland species such as sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and pignut *Conopodium majus* are frequent and heather *Calluna vulgaris* is found occasionally. An ungrazed area dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* is one of the richest Wiltshire sites so far discovered for ground growing chalk mosses. *Rhodobryum roseum* is abundant on old anthills and *Scapania aspera* is known from only one other site in the county.

Hawthorn bushes are scattered across the slopes while denser blocks of scrub with hazel, ash and blackthorn also occur. Additional scrub is present on the plateau, and includes both gorse *Ulex europaeus* and western gorse *Ulex gallii*, an uncommon species in Wiltshire. The acid loving heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and foxglove *Digitalis purpurea* are found amongst this scrub.

The northern scarp or the plateau supports ancient ash woodlands, in which hazel is distributed throughout and field maple is present over much of the area. Small pockets of small-leaved lime, wych elm and English elm also occur. Typical shrub layer plants

include wayfaring tree, wild privet and spindle overlying a ground flora dominated by dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, with uncommon species such as herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia* and Solomon's-seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*. Lungwort *Lobaria pulmonaria*, a lichen restricted to ancient woodland is also present. More acidic woodland with pedunculate oak and downy birch occupies the plateau, where ground layer plants include wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and lady-fern *Athyrium filix-femina*. In some places, woodland is continuing to invade grassland and woodland herbs such as wild strawberry *Fragaria vesca* and bugle *Ajuga reptans* grow in the adjacent sward while disintegrating anthills can still be found well into the developing wood.

Invertebrates and birds have been little recorded but the brown argus butterfly does occupy the site and anthills or the yellow meadow-ant *Lasius flavus* are widespread. The woods support a typical bird fauna, while buzzard and green woodpecker use the downland.