

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE SITE NAME: BOWERCHALKE DOWNS

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

Local Planning Authorities: SALISBURY DISTRICT COUNCIL, Wiltshire County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 992223 Area: 128.6 (ha.) 317.7 (ac.)
SU 004218
SU 015219
SU 019225
SU 033227

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184 1:10,000: ST 92 SE, SU 02 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971 Date of Last Revision: 1977

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988 Date of Last Revision: 19 March 1992

Other Information:

Within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Previously notified as Woodminton/Marleycombe Down and Knowle Hill.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This site is an extensive area of floristically rich chalk grassland, a habitat which has become increasingly scarce due to agricultural intensification. It lies along an escarpment of the Middle Chalk overlooking the Ebbles Valley in South Wiltshire and has slopes of several aspects. Present on the site are plant and animal species with a nationally restricted distribution.

Most of the site comprises species-rich turf in which sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* and meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* are major components whilst quaking-grass *Briza media*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, and cowslip *Primula veris* are widespread and frequent. Several species considered indicative of continuous management in the absence of fertilisers, herbicides and ploughing also occur throughout. These include clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and betony *Stachys officinalis*. There is, however, much variety within the vegetation and several species that are generally scattered in the turf such as glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, spring-sedge *Carex caryophyllea*, wild carrot *Daucus carota* and kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* show localised abundance. Over quite extensive areas dwarf sedge *Carex humilis* becomes dominant, a species largely restricted to the downs of south west Wiltshire and Dorset. Two other species with a localised national distribution are early gentian *Gentianella anglica* and musk orchid *Herminium monorchis*. The latter is found in an area particularly rich in orchids including pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, bee *Ophrys apifera*,

common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea* and twayblade *Listera ovata*.

Where the sward has been more lightly grazed upright brome *Bromus erectus*, hairy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens*, cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* become more predominant. Associated with these are herbs such as yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, greater knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa* and common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* as well as species common to the whole site like salad burnet and cowslip. In these areas there are also colonies of meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata* and small populations of both greater butterfly orchid *Platanthera chlorantha* and adder's-tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*.

Scrub is scattered on some of the slopes becoming dense in one or two places. There is a diversity of shrub and tree species; hawthorn, blackthorn, wayfaring tree, gorse, whitebeam, hazel and ash.

Anthills produced by the yellow meadow ant *Lasius flavus* are a feature of several slopes. The grassland supports a variety of butterfly species including dingy skipper, dark green fritillary and common blue. The adonis blue is also found where its larval food plant, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* grows in favourable conditions. In Britain this butterfly is confined to a limited number of chalk and limestone grassland sites in the south.

Birds typical of this habitat include skylark, corn bunting, yellowhammer and grey partridge. Both green and great spotted woodpecker visit the site to feed and buzzard and kestrel hunt the area.