

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE      SITE NAME: WHITESHEET HILL

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 804346      Area: 136.1 (ha.) 336.3 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183      1:10,000: ST 83 NW ST 73 NE  
ST 83 SW ST 73 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1965      Date of Last Revision: 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

In part owned by the National Trust. Also in part a Wiltshire Trust for Nature Conservation reserve. Within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Whitesheet Hill comprises an extensive area of botanically rich chalk grassland on predominantly west-facing slopes of the Middle Chalk. Above these slopes are areas of flatter more nutrient-rich grassland. Both these semi-natural habitats have become increasingly scarce due to agricultural intensification throughout the country. The site supports nationally restricted species of animals and plants, and is one of the most westerly areas of downland in Britain.

On the chalk slopes and earthwork banks sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and in places upright brome *Bromus erectus* are major components of the turf, together with abundant herbs including salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, cowslip *Primula veris* and mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*. Growing with these is a wide range of species considered indicative of a long period of uninterrupted management, such as chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, green-winged orchid *Orchis morio*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and the nationally restricted dwarf sedge *Carex humilis* and burnt orchid *Orchis ustulata*. Several species especially characteristic of the western chalk occur, for example devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, betony *Stachys officinalis* and heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*.

On the flatter land above the slope downland flora grades into a more mesotrophic community, typical components being yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*, sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and brown bent *Agrostis canina*, accompanied by pignut *Conopodium majus*, tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and the uncommon meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata*.

Hawthorn scrub with occasional privet, hazel, ash, field maple and holly is scattered over parts of the down, becoming dense in one or two places. A number of mosses of chalk soils occur including local species *Seligeria calcarea*, *Ephemerum recurvifolium* and *Entodon concinnus*. An area of old chalk workings contains a mosaic of communities ranging from the open chalk of the quarry face to short herb-rich turf and patches of coarser grassy sward. This diversity of conditions is favourable to many invertebrates.

Several nationally restricted invertebrates are found on the site including the snail *Abida secale*, the beetles *Ceuthorhynchus terminatus* and *Bruchidius cisti*, and the weevil *Apion waltoni*. There is a rich butterfly fauna with marsh fritillary, green hairstreak, grizzled skipper, chalkhill blue and the nationally restricted adonis blue, the food plant of which, the horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, is widespread on the down. Anthills of the yellow meadow ant *Lasius flavus* are much in evidence. Other animal species also make use of the downland and scrub, especially birds such as skylark, yellowhammer, green woodpecker and kestrel. Field vole, rabbit and roe deer occur and there are at least two large active badger setts. Reptiles are represented by the common lizard.