

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE      SITE NAME: BURCOMBE DOWN

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: SU 064295      Area: 47.1 (ha.) 116.4 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184      1:10,000: SU 02 NE, SU 03 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971      Date of Last Revision: 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1989      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Subject to a management agreement with the Nature Conservancy Council under Section 15 of the Countryside Act, 1968.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Burcombe Down supports botanically rich, grazed, chalk grassland on a north-facing scarp slope of the Middle Chalk and on the sides of a dry valley running south-west to north-east. Nationally restricted plant species are present in the turf. A flat-topped spur separating the two areas supports a different grassland community with a higher nutrient-status.

The site supports a large number of chalk grassland plant species. Both sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* and red fescue *Festuca rubra* are common in the sward and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, upright brome *Bromus erectus* and quaking-grass *Briza media* are widespread. The glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring sedge *C. caryophyllea* also frequently occur but herbs make up a high proportion of the turf. The commoner species include salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, cowslip *Primula veris*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* and common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*. Also present are devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, these being particularly characteristic of the chalk of south-west Wiltshire.

Several orchids have been recorded, including fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and the rarer musk orchid *Herminium monorchis*. The nationally rare dwarf sedge *Carex humilis*, field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius* and bastard toadflax *Thesium humifusum* also occur.

The spur between the two main downland areas supports a more nutrient-rich sward. Here red fescue predominates with herb species such as burnet-saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*, red clover *Trifolium pratense* and bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus*

*corniculatus*. Herbs more typical of chalk grassland, such as harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* also occur occasionally.

The grassland supports a good range of annual and biennial plants which prefer more open turf. These include carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, eyebright *Euphrasia nemorosa*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum* and hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum officinale*. Other species associated with lighter grazing include marjoram *Origanum vulgare*, wild basil *Clinopodium vulgare*, common valerian *Valeriana officinalis*, perforate St. John's-wort *Hypericum perforatum* and yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*.

Species-rich scrub has developed on parts of the slope. This includes the shrubs hawthorn, spindle, buckthorn, wayfaring tree, privet and, as young trees, whitebeam, ash and holly. Of particular note are the scattered individuals of juniper *Juniperus communis*, a declining species which, in southern England, is almost entirely restricted to chalk downland. Patches of gorse also occur at the tops of the slopes.

Anthills, constructed by the yellow meadow-ant *Lasius flavus*, are conspicuous towards the bottom of certain slopes and support typical plants such as wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and common rock-rose.