



Old Winchester Hill

National Nature Reserve



working today
for nature tomorrow

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Introduction

The reserve is located towards the western end of the South Downs, situated on the steep west and south facing scarp slopes of the Meon Valley.

This local landmark occupies a prominent and visually attractive site, which has been enjoyed by generations of Hampshire people. A circular footpath takes in steep slopes and woodland, or you can keep on level ground by following the hill fort route at the top of the hill. Visitors can also join the South Downs Way: but, where the trail meets the hill fort, horse-riders and cyclists must follow the signposted route around the reserve's southern boundary.

The localised climate of Old Winchester Hill combines with physical features such as the steep slopes, flat hilltop, and the depth - or even lack - of soil. This creates a variety of conditions that are ideal for a wide range of plants and animals. The flower-rich grasslands have developed on the thin chalky soils that are low in nutrients, and prevent vigorous species from dominating the finer herbs. There are distinct differences between the plants found on the warm, dry, south-facing slopes and those on the steep north-facing area, and in the coombes, which are much damper.

Archaeology

You can see many overlapping layers of history here. Bronze Age burial mounds for important members of local society were erected prominently on the crest of the hill between 4500 and 3500 years ago. These mounds - known as barrows - can now be seen as large grassy lumps in groups to the west of, and within, a later hill fort. There are also some smaller mounds, which were partially engulfed when the southern and western ramparts of the fort were constructed some 2500 years ago. The hill fort also overlies a pattern of prehistoric fields.

The fort, which has never been excavated, is believed to have provided a defended settlement for a Celtic chieftain. Its defences comprise a single bank and ditch enclosing about four hectares. Within the fort itself, you can still see the site of the huts as subtle hollows.

Some of the smaller hollows were created during World War II, when the army used the hill as a mortar firing range. Some sections were never fully cleared of ordnance so, for your own safety, please keep to the well-marked paths that avoid these areas.



Please report any metallic or suspicious objects, either to the voluntary wardens, English Nature staff, or to the police. Do not pick them up.

These earthworks provide a varied topography that increases the diversity of the chalk downland habitats.

Wildlife

Several types of orchids are amongst the specialities that occur on Old Winchester Hill. They include greater-butterfly, bee, fly, frog, common spotted and fragrant orchids, all of which are found on the slopes around

the hill fort in May and June. Field fleawort, a very localised species, also flowers at this time amongst a huge population of cowslips.

Ox-eye daisies are in flower during July, as well as the rare round-headed rampion that occurs in magnificent numbers on the south-facing slope of the hill fort. Later, you can see small and devil's bit scabious, along with the autumn lady's-tresses. Look out, too, for the concentration of juniper bushes on the southern slope of the hill fort. All these plants are to be found amongst the herb-rich grassland, which is mainly dominated by sheep's fescue grass. Elsewhere, scrub and woodland provides a valuable contrast for wildlife.

Insects and butterflies like the chalkhill blue can be seen in huge numbers during the summer months, whilst dormice, badgers and deer live in the woodland.

Management

Old Winchester Hill needs constant management to conserve the variety of habitats, and to maintain the grassland that has been created by centuries of livestock grazing. We achieve this by continuing the traditional sheep grazing, and by mechanically clearing some areas of scrub during the winter. Our management work helps to provide ideal conditions for a wonderful diversity of wildlife.

Access for visitors

You are welcome to visit the reserve on foot at any time, but dogs must always be kept under close control to avoid disturbing the livestock.

The main car park at the northern end of the reserve gives access to the picnic area and interpretive unit. RADAR key holders may use the car park on Old Winchester Hill lane, and follow the Easy Access Trail to the hill fort. There is also parking for disabled visitors at the viewpoint along the lane.

Old Winchester Hill is one of a suite of National Nature Reserves in England, established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain.

English Nature is the government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and natural features throughout England.

For further information, please contact:

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Front cover photographs

Top left - Cowslips, Old Winchester Hill
NNR Bob Lord / English Nature.

Bottom left - Chalkhill blue
Bob Lord / English Nature.

Main picture right - Old Winchester Hill
NNR Chris Gomersall / English Nature 26,409.



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