

Site Name: Dabble Bank

County: Durham

District: Easington

Status:

Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 (as amended).

Local Planning Authorities:

Durham County Council
Easington District Council

National Grid Reference:

NZ 364434

Ordnance Survey Sheet:

1: 50,000: 88
1: 10,000: NZ 34 SE

Area:

4.12 ha

Date Notified (under 1981 Act)

20 April 2002

Reasons for Notification:

Dabble Bank is notified for the nationally scarce grassland communities (NVC CG2 *Festuca ovina* – *Avenula pratensis* and CG6 *Avenula pubescens*) established on magnesian limestone.

General Description:

Dabble Bank faces west in a small valley cut into the magnesian limestone plateau and retains unimproved, species-rich grassland. Its location in the plateau, away from the magnesian limestone scarp slope where most similar SSSI are concentrated, is unusual. The gentle slopes of Dabble Bank give rise to deep calcareous brown-earth soils, which become shallower locally. These soils support a mosaic of vegetation types reflecting the variation in soil type, including lime-loving (calcicolous) grassland and neutral (mesotrophic) grassland types with scattered scrub.

Due to the limited distribution of magnesian limestone nationally, grasslands on this substrate are nationally scarce. These have been further fragmented due to agricultural intensification and quarrying activities. The interest of the site is the presence of species-rich grassland characterised by downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* which occurs nationally only at scattered localities on lowland limestones and is a rare vegetation type in County Durham.

The main slope supports species-rich grassland community characterised by downy oat-grass, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, quaking grass *Briza media*, heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring sedge *C. caryophyllea*. Of note is pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* which is

rare in County Durham. Other species present in this sward include small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, field scabious *Knautia arvensis*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, cowslip *Primula veris*, hoary plantain *Plantago media*, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum*, common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and northern marsh orchid *D. purpurella*.

Small areas of fine turf are found on thin soils. These are dominated by sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* with wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris* and kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*.

Deep soils towards the base of the slopes are characterised by neutral grassland vegetation characterised by false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, black knapweed *Centaurea nigra* and many of the lime-loving plants found on the main slope. There are also several areas of scattered scrub, dominated by hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, encroaching on the grasslands. Clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, occurs but this is almost certainly an introduced garden escape.

Other Information

Lowland calcicolous grasslands are a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (*Festuco-Brometalia*) area habitats listed on Annex 1 of the EC Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Flora and Fauna (92/43/EEC).