

County: Somerset

Site name: East Polden Grasslands

District: South Somerset

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

Local Planning Authority: Somerset County Council, South Somerset District Council

National Grid Reference: ST 474325, ST 485323, ST 490340, ST 497323, ST 498315, ST 507298, ST 518288

Area: 124.05 ha

Ordnance Survey Sheet: 1: 50,000: 182, 183 1: 10,000: ST 43 SE, ST 52 NW, ST 53 SW

Date notified (Under 1949 Act):

Date of last revision:

Date notified (under 1981 Act): 1999

Date of last revision:

Other information:

The Large Blue is listed on Schedule 5 and Early Gentian on Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 (as amended). The Large Blue is listed on Annex IV, Early Gentian on Annex II and Calcareous Grasslands on Annex I of the EC Directive on the Conservation of Habitats and Species 1992 (92/43/EEC). The Large Blue, Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Early Gentian are on the list of Priority species of the UK Biodiversity Group Report 1998.

Description and reasons for notification:

This site has typical examples of species-rich, unimproved, calcareous grassland with scrub and amongst the many plant species found in this habitat is the Early Gentian *Gentianella anglica*, which is endemic to Britain. Its other main interest lies in its suitability as a habitat for the Large Blue butterfly *Maculinea arion*, which has been successfully reintroduced onto the site.

The underlying rocks in this area are Triassic Keuper Marls and marls from the Rhaetic and Lower Lias which are overlain by calcareous clay soils of the Sherborne and Worcester series. The site is predominantly on steep slopes with a southerly or westerly aspect and which typically slope from about 100 metres down to 40 metres AOD.

Much of the grassland can be classified as the Sheep's Fescue/Meadow Oatgrass *Festuca ovina*/*Avenula pratensis* community and it contains many grass and herb species which are characteristic of such swards. Amongst these species are Quaking Grass *Briza media*, Crested Hairgrass *Koeleria macrantha*, Rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* and Small Scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*. A number of species of orchid also occur including: Autumn Ladies-tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*, Green-winged Orchid *Orchis morio*, Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*, Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and Greater Butterfly Orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*. On the steepest slopes and thinnest soils the grassland differs slightly with herbs such as Common Centaury *Centaureum erythraea*, Yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, Carlina thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, Thyme *Thymus polytrichus* and Mouse-ear Hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum* being more abundant in very short swards. These swards have affinities

to the Sheep's Fescue/Carline Thistle and Sheep's Fescue/Mouse-ear Hawkweed/Thyme communities. Also occurring in this habitat is the nationally scarce Nit-grass *Gastridium ventricosum*. On some of the flatter areas with deeper soils the Upright Brome *Bromopsis erecta* grassland community, which also contains a wide diversity of herb species, is present.

Scrub associated with the calcareous grassland provides the site with structural and botanical diversity and food and shelter for invertebrates. The main scrub species are: Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, Wild Privet *Ligustrum vulgare* and Dog Rose *Rosa canina*. Small areas of ancient broadleaved woodland occur, adding further diversity.

The warm, southerly and westerly facing slopes of this site, particularly those which are sheltered, are an attractive habitat for many butterflies in addition to the Large Blue. Brown Hairstreak *Thecla betulae*, White-letter Hairstreak *Strymonidia w-album*, Duke of Burgundy Fritillary *Hamearis lucina* and Pearl-bordered Fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* are all found here and all are nationally scarce. There are two nationally scarce grasshopper species present; Rufous Grasshopper *Gomphocerippus rufus* and Woodland Grasshopper *Omocestus rufipes*. Several nationally scarce species of moth, beetle, bee and ant also occur.

Site notified to the Secretary of State on 11 June 1999