

**County:** Wiltshire

**Site name:** Bratton Downs

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

**Local Planning Authority:** West Wiltshire District Council, Wiltshire County Council

**National grid reference:** ST 925522

**Ordnance survey sheet:** 1:50,000: 184,183 1:10,000: ST 85 SE, ST 95 SE, ST 95 SW

**Date notified (Under 1949 Act):** April 1971 **Date of last revision:** September 1977

**Date notified (under 1981 Act):** 6 Mar 1992 **Date of last revision:**

**Area:** 395.8 ha 978.0 ac

**Other information:**

**Description and reasons for notification:**

This site is notified for both its geomorphological and biological features. It provides an exceptional range of landform features associated with periglacial conditions. Biologically the site is diverse, comprising species-rich calcareous grassland and ancient broadleaved woodland. Both of these habitats have become increasingly uncommon in Britain since 1940, following agricultural intensification and conversion to plantation respectively. The site supports many rare and nationally uncommon species of plant and animal.

Bratton is a key site for studies of periglacial geomorphology. It provides an excellent assemblage of landforms including combes, spring sapping features, river capture and a wind gap. It also contains the best British example of escarpment fluates, a type of periglacial landform. The area is of great significance and potential for studies of scarp evolution during the Pleistocene.

The extensive area of chalk grassland has a wide range of herb species and more than twenty species of grasses. Over much of the site upright brome (*Bromus erectus*) predominates, but tor-grass (*Brachypodium pinnatum*) becomes abundant in places and, in areas where grazing has been more intense, sheep's fescue (*Festuca ovina*) and meadow oat-grass (*Avenula pratensis*) characterise the sward. Many species are common throughout these communities such as glaucous sedge (*Carex flacca*) spring sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*), dwarf thistle (*Cirsium acaule*) salad-burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*), burnet saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*) and devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*). A number of species that occur at Bratton are typically associated with unimproved chalk grassland which has had a long period of uninterrupted management without fertilisers or herbicides. Amongst these are sainfoin (*Onobrychis viciifolia*), dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*), autumn ladies-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*), chalk milkwort (*Polygala calcarea*) and fragrant orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*). Populations of the uncommon bastard toadflax (*Thesium humifusum*), a species strictly associated with southern chalk and limestone, occur at several localities.

Scrub is developing on most of the slopes and in places this has formed dense blocks with standard trees penetrating the canopy. The most frequent species are hawthorn, buckthorn, blackthorn, holly, wayfaring tree, ash, whitebeam and field maple.

At the eastern end the steep north-facing slope supports two woods of ash and wych elm. Other components of the canopy are oak, field maple, beech and sycamore. Hazel is widespread in the shrub layer accompanied by young wych elm and elder with occasional guelder rose, crab apple and holly. There is a rich ground flora dominated by dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) with frequent tufted hair-grass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*) and male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*). Other species occurring include herb paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) nettle leaved bellflower (*Campanula trachelium*) wood spurge (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*), Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum*) and spurge laurel (*Daphne laureola*), all plants typically associated with ancient woodlands.

Conditions within this extensive semi-natural area are favourable to many invertebrates. There is a diverse assemblage of butterflies with over thirty species recorded, most of which breed on the site. They include species which have declined elsewhere in Britain due to destruction of habitat, notably marsh fritillary, Duke of Burgundy, chalkhill blue, pearl-bordered fritillary and Adonis blue. The colony of the latter is believed to be the largest in Wiltshire. The grassland supports other uncommon insects such as the bug *Sehirus dubius* and the forester (*Adscita statices*), cistus forester (*A. geryon*) and scarce forester (*A. globulariae*) moths, the last of which is nationally rare.

Birds recorded include lesser whitethroat, linnet, yellowhammer, goldcrest and green woodpecker.