

COUNTY: SURREY SITE NAME: BANSTEAD DOWNS

DISTRICT: REIGATE AND BANSTEAD

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

Local Planning Authority: REIGATE AND BANSTEAD DISTRICT COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 252610      Area: 124.1 (ha.) 306.6 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 176, 187    1:10,000: TQ 26 SW, SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1955      Date of Last Revision: 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985      Date of last Revision: –

Other Information:

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This site consists of undulating downland on the dip slope of the North Downs escarpment. It comprises extensive areas of dense and scattered scrub, woodland and areas of open chalk grassland most of which are golf course and public open space. The diversity of habitats makes this an important site for breeding and overwintering birds, and several groups of invertebrates are also present. In addition the site supports a rich chalk flora, including a number of locally rare plants.

Open grassland to the west of the railway is used as a golf course resulting in a great deal of variation in the sward, ranging from improved greens and tees, to sheep grazed and mown fairways and rough. In general the fairways are rich in species and a number of locally rare plants restricted to chalk can still be found. These include early gentian *Gentianella anglica*, dwarf mouse-ear *Cerastium pumilum*, fine-leaved sandwort *Minuartia hybrida*, cat-mint *Nepeta cataria*, bastard toad-flax *Thesium humifusum*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* and sickle medick *Medicago falcata*. These occur in a springy turf dominated by false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum* and common bent *Agrostis tenuis*, with commoner chalk plants such as yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and marjoram *Origanum vulgare*.

Rough chalk grassland east of the railway line is not grazed or managed. This accounts for the poor diversity of the sward which typically consists of tall grasses, including false brome, with cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata*, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, and for the invasion by shrub species such as hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, gorse *Ulex europaeus* and wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana*.

Large areas of the site are dominated by mature hawthorn, growing in association with oak *Quercus* spp., and climbers such as ivy *Hedera helix*, and traveller's joy *Clematis vitalba*. Gorse is dominant in a few areas, mainly to the east of the railway line where there are

dense belts of gorse scrub. In the west of the site, however, there is a large belt of mixed scrub which is dominated by hawthorn but also includes a number of species characteristic of chalk sites such as dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana* and the local rarity, juniper *Juniperus communis*. Scrub also occurs in association with the pioneer birch *Betula pendula*/oak woods which have developed over part of the site in the absence of grazing or golf course management. More mature woodland dominated by pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* with hawthorn, holly *Ilex aquifolium* and birch, line the western edge of the site.

The variety of habitats at Banstead Downs provide feeding and breeding grounds for a range of different invertebrates and birds, and eleven species of invertebrate which are rare or local in Surrey have been recorded at the site.

The scrub and open grassland habitats support good populations of butterflies and moths (lepidoptera) and bugs (hemiptera). These include the following butterflies: small blue *Cupido minimus*, adonis blue *Lysandra bellargus*, chalkhill blue *Lysandra coridon*, the moth *Conopia anthraciniformis* and the bugs *Miris striatus*, *Phytocoris longipennis* and *Dichroscytus valesianus*, the latter a Mediterranean species which is very rare in Great Britain where it is at its most northerly limit. Also of note is the fauna associated with scrub and dead wood, particularly the beetles (coleoptera) which includes *Bitoma crenata*, a localised species.

Extensive scrub and woodland at Banstead Downs makes this a valuable site for birds, and 57 species have been recorded, 44 of which are reported to breed here. The most interesting species of breeding bird include stonechat, grasshopper warbler, lesser whitethroat, great and lesser spotted woodpecker and tawny owl.