

**COUNTY:** BEDFORDSHIRE                      **SITE NAME:** DUNSTABLE AND WHIPSNADE DOWNS

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

**Local Planning Authorities:** South Bedfordshire District Council  
Bedfordshire County Council

**National Grid Reference:** TL 005205  
SP 998187

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:**                      **1:10,000:** SP 91 NE, TL 01 NW, TL 02 SW

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):**                      **Date of Last Revision:**

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1987                      **Date of Last Revision:**

**Area:** 73.36 ha 181.27 ac

**Other Information:** Part of the site is owned by The National Trust.

### **Description and Reasons for Notification**

A steep escarpment situated on the Middle Chalk, this site extends for three kilometres between Dunstable and Whipsnade. With a westerly aspect, the steep slopes support a typical chalk downland flora, a habitat greatly reduced in extent both within Bedfordshire and nationally.

The lack of grazing in recent years had led to a succession with the development of both open and more dense scrub which forms a mosaic with the areas of open grassland. Management is now controlling further scrub development.

The downs support species uncommon in Bedfordshire including great pignut *Bunium bulbocastanum*, a rare plant confined to south east England and locally abundant on this site, field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius* and frog orchid *Ceologlossum viride*.

The grassland is dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus*, with other grass species characteristic of calcareous grassland such as sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, quaking grass *Briza media* and crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* together with a rich variety of typical herbs including common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*, and salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*. Also present are glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, common milkwort *Polygala vulgaris*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* and wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*.

Additional habitats are provided by areas of scattered and dense scrub and tall herb communities. The scrub is dominated by hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, with associated dog rose *Rosa canina*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and species characteristic of the chalk downland, buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus*, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana* and common whitebeam *Sorbus aria*. Small areas of deeper soils above the slopes support tall herb species such as hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium*, thistles *Cirsium* spp. wild mignonette *Reseda lutea* and wild carrot *Daucus carota*.

This site supports an important butterfly population with species which are uncommon and of local distribution in the county, including chalkhill blue *Lysandra coridon*, small blue *Cupido minimus*, and dark green fritillary *Argynnis aglaja*.