

COUNTY: OXFORDSHIRE **SITE NAME:** HACKPEN, WARREN AND GRAMP'S HILL DOWNS

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

Local Planning Authorities: Vale of the White Horse

National Grid Reference: SU355845

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU38 NE, NW, SE, SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1975 **Date of Last Revision:** 1977

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 72.9 ha 180.1 ac

Other information: Formerly notified under the name of Hackpen Hill and Crowhole Bottom.

Description and Reasons for Notification

This site is an amalgamation of three discrete, adjacent tracts of unimproved chalk grassland. Together they represent an extensive area of a habitat now uncommon in the Berkshire Downs.

The site lies on the Middle Chalk and has all aspects and a wide range of slope-gradients represented. It has well-drained, silty soils of the Wantage 1 Series, with the thinner soils of the upper slopes containing a high proportion of large chalk nodules.

The majority of the site comprises a close-grazed, species-rich sward, with a composition which varies between and within each of the three blocks.

Hackpen Down, the largest and most westerly area, has slopes with a wide variety of aspect and gradient. Most of the grassland is dominated by red fescue *Festuca rubra*, but this is replaced by upright brome *Bromus erectus* on some middle and lower slopes. The herb flora includes horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, common rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea* and frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*. An enclosed, ungrazed strip on Hackpen Down contains hawthorns and elder scrub, interspersed with upright brome grassland and herbs including sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia* and basil thyme *Acinos arvensis*.

Warren Down, the central area, is on a moderately steep north-facing slope. The eastern half is dominated by upright brome, with a herb flora which includes bulbous buttercup *Ranunculus bulbosus*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, purging flax *Linum catharticum* and common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. The western half is grassland dominated by meadow grass *Poa* sp. It also has patches of bare soil and rabbit damaged slopes which have been colonised by plants of disturbed ground, including henbane *Hyoscyamus niger*.

Gramp's Hill Down, the most easterly area, similarly has moderate, north-facing slopes. The grassland is dominated by upright brome, and also contains false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and quaking grass *Briza media*. The rich assemblage of herbs includes yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* and a high density of cowslip *Primula veris*.

The site has eleven species of butterfly recorded, including the chalkhill blue, brown argus and marbled white.