

COUNTY: BUCKINGHAMSHIRE **SITE NAME:** RUSHBEDS WOOD & RAILWAY CUTTING

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

Local Planning Authorities: Aylesbury Vale District Council, Buckinghamshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SP667155

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 165 **1:10,000:** SP61 NE/SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1972 **Date of Last Revision:**

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1982 **Date of Last Revision:** 1989

Area: 80.21 ha 198.2 ac

Other information: Provisionally renotified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1982 to coincide with sale by Forestry Commission. Renotified formally in 1989 to encompass meadowland and the cuttings of the disused Dorton to Ludgershall stretch of railway. Rushbeds Wood and Meadows are now owned by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust and managed as a nature reserve.

Description and Reasons for Notification

An area of ancient broadleaved woodland bordered by unimproved meadows on heavy and frequently waterlogged Oxford Clay soils. A deep railway cutting runs along the eastern edge, extending north and south of the site, in which species-rich limestone grassland and scrub reflect the exposure of calcareous grit of the Kellaway Beds. Both woodland and grasslands, parts of which are crossed by intensely convoluted streams, support an exceptional invertebrate fauna of which the butterflies have been particularly well recorded. The site provides important information on the ecological significance of woodland structure and management on a wide range of breeding birds.

Rushbeds Wood contains the classic wet ash-maple stand type of the clays of the English Midlands, as well as remnants of oak and hazel coppice, though most of the mature oaks were felled in the 1940s and only scattered, stag-headed individuals remain. Parts of the wood support stands of virtually pure hazel. English elm and hornbeam also occur and willow and aspen dominate the wetter areas. Understorey and scrub species include blackthorn, which locally forms dense thickets, both common and Midland hawthorn, crab apple, dogwood, spindle, elder, guelder rose, wild currant, field rose and honeysuckle.

The woodland layer contains numerous species indicative of the long continuity of tree cover, including the grasses hairy brome *Bromus ramosus*, wood poa *Poa nemoralis* and wood millet *Milium effusum* and herbs such as wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, primrose *Primula vulgaris*, moschatel *Adoxa moschatellina* and wood speedwell *Veronica montana*. Many of these are more abundant in the rides where, in the wetter areas and particularly alongside the streams, additional species include the sedges *Carex remota*, *C. pendula*, *C. hirta*, *C. otrubae*, *C. acutiformis* and *C. ovalis*. Typical herbs of these damper areas include wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*, greater bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus* and opposite leaved golden saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*, a species of restricted distribution in Buckinghamshire. Locally bush-grass *Calamagrostis epigejos* and flote-grass *Glyceria fluitans* dominate.

The limestone grassland of the railway cutting, dominated by upright brome-grass *Bromus erectus*, is unusual in the Vale of Aylesbury. The sward contains a variety of typical calcareous species such as cowslip *Primula veris*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, zig-zag clover *Trifolium medium*, twayblade *Listera ovata* and common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. Other particularly noteworthy species include adder's-tongue fern *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, green-winged and butterfly

orchids *Orchis morio* and *Platanthera chlorantha*, and three nationally rare species: maiden pink *Dianthus deltoides*, field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius* and dragon's teeth *Tetragonolobus maritimus*. The diversity of the cutting is enhanced by mixed scrub

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containing gorse *Ulex europaeus*, birch and young oak, as well as wild pear *Pyrus pyraster*, while additional interest comes from the various culverts, ponds and ditches, and from the walls and tunnel portals, the latter harbouring a number of ferns, including wall rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria*, an increasingly uncommon plant of such habitats.

The sheep-grazed meadows bordering the entire northern and southern edges of the wood and enclosed by species-rich hedges, show some evidence of ridge and furrow and support a range of species associated with undisturbed and unimproved grassland. Common species include yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*, quaking grass *Briza media*, meadow barley *Hordeum secalinum*, sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica*, hoary ragwort *Senecio erucifolius*, meadow cranesbill *Geranium pratense*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, heath dog-violet *Viola canina* and musk mallow *Malva moschata*. Two fields of the northern complex provide the best example of this meadow community in Buckinghamshire. Damper areas support many species also found in the wet woodland rides together with hemp agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum* and common spike-rush *Eleocharis palustris*. The woodland edge-meadow hedge complex forms an important 'edge' habitat for many breeding bird species and invertebrates.

The diversity of bryophytes and lichens, which include several species of restricted distribution in the county, is surprisingly high in view of the coppice origin of Rushbeds Wood and the air pollution levels in Buckinghamshire. A good range of fungi also occur including the rare *Tarzetta cupularis* and *Lactarius circellatus*, a species usually confined to hornbeam.

Over thirty species of breeding butterfly are to be found, including the nationally rare black hairstreak, and nationally scarce species such as wood white, purple emperor, Duke of Burgundy and marsh fritillary. Other species typical of downland and woods, but which have declined considerably in Buckinghamshire, include dark-green and silver-washed fritillaries, chalkhill blue, brown argus and dingy and grizzled skippers. Three nationally scarce moth species, brown scallop, common fan-foot and reddish light arches, are also recorded from this site. Other noteworthy insects include the rare bee *Eucera longicornis* and the small, lesser and great stag beetles *Sinodendron cylindricum*, *Dorcus parallelipipedus* and *Lucanus cervus*, the last now unusual north of the Thames.

The diversity of this site provides a wide range of habitats for many common breeding birds including warbler species such as garden warbler, blackcap, whitethroat and lesser whitethroat. Both green and greater spotted woodpeckers breed here as do tawny owl and sparrowhawk. The ponds and ditches support breeding colonies of both smooth and great-crested newts.