

COUNTY: EAST SUSSEX SITE NAME: OFFHAM MARSHES

DISTRICT: LEWES

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

Local Planning Authority: LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL

National Grid Ref: TQ 404118 Area: 38.1 (ha.) 94.1 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 198 1:10,000: TQ 41 SW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1989

Reasons for Notification:

This alluvial grazing marsh supports large amphibian populations, a feature which is unusual for this type of habitat in Sussex. This is due to the close proximity of the breeding sites to the areas of suitable terrestrial habitat (woodland, scrub and fen) on the flood plain and the chalk escarpment. The site also supports several scarce dragonflies (Odonata), beetles (Coleoptera) and flies (Diptera).

The main amphibian breeding sites are the ditches which border the fields. Here the freshwater habitats range from open water, with plants such as water violet *Hottonia palustris*, fan-leaved water crowfoot *Ranunculus circinatus* and arrowhead *Sagittaria sagittifolia*, to fen dominated by bur-reed *Sparganium erectum*, with purple loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria* and yellow flag iris *Iris pseudacorus*. Winter and spring flood pools in a field dominated by hard rush *Juncus inflexus* are also important amphibian breeding sites.

One of the poorly drained fields has a sedge-rich sward, consisting mainly of brown sedge *Carex disticha* and common sedge *Carex nigra* with meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, spike rush *Eleocharis palustris* and marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*. The most important terrestrial habitat for amphibians are areas of fen dominated by dense growths of meadowsweet and stinging nettles *Urtica dioica* as well as the woodlands and the scrub which lines the railway embankment.

An area of woodland near the fen areas has shady growths of meadowsweet, stinging nettles and yellow flag iris under a canopy dominated by alder *Alnus glutinosa* and crack willow *Salix fragilis*. The woods on the chalk escarpment have, under a canopy of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*, damp areas with dense growths of hart's-tongue fern *Phyllitis scolopendrium*, whose dead fronds provide ideal terrestrial habitats for amphibians. Similarly fallen timber provides valuable shady refuges for amphibians as well as dead-wood invertebrates.

Three amphibian species breed in large numbers in the ditches. These include several thousand common toads *Bufo bufo*, making this one of the best sites in the county for this species. Their black tadpoles are particularly obvious in the early summer. Less obvious are the smooth newt *Triturus vulgaris* and the palmate newt *T. helveticus*.

Smaller numbers of common frogs *Rana temporaria* breed more frequently in the shallow pools that form in the fields. These large amphibian populations provide a food supply for grass snakes *Natrix natrix*, which breed on the site. The ditches support the scarce hairy dragonfly *Brachytron pratense*, the variable damselfly *Coenagrion pulchellum*, and many water beetles, including Britain's largest species, the rare great silver beetle *Hydrophilus piceus*. The damp fields support several uncommon flies, whilst the rare hoverfly *Ferdinandia ruficornis* breeds in the woods.