

COUNTY: GLOUCESTERSHIRE

SITE NAME: COOMBE HILL

DISTRICT: STROUD

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

Local Planning Authority: GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, Stroud District Council

National Grid Reference: ST 765942

Area: 15.4 (ha.) 38.1 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 162

1:10,000: ST 79 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): N/A

Date of Last Revision: N/A

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 22 November 1994

Other Information:

New site.

Within the Cotswolds AONB and the Cotswold Hills ESA.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Coombe Hill is of special interest for its large area of flower rich, unimproved limestone grassland. It is one of only a few recent sites for the nationally rare limestone woundwort *Stachys alpina*. *

The site occupies moderately steep, mainly south facing slopes close to Wotton-under-Edge. It consists of a large, unimproved limestone grassland pasture, a small area of ungrazed grassland and a fringe of broadleaved woodland along the western boundary. The underlying geology is Inferior Oolite, a type of Jurassic limestone.

The grassland is of the type characteristic of the Cotswolds, being an example of the upright brome-tor grass *Bromus erectus*-*Brachypodium pinnatum* plant community. A survey of 200 Cotswold grasslands found that Coombe Hill ranked in the top ten sites for the abundance of herbs in the turf. It is closely grazed, which is now unusual for a grassland of this type. Many such grasslands have been lost, not only through agricultural improvement but also from abandonment and cessation of grazing.

In addition to upright brome and tor grass, other characteristic grasses include sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* and quaking-grass *Briza media*. Herbs typical of this community are present such as salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria* and wild thyme *Thymus praecox*. Other more locally restricted lime-loving plants occur such as betony *Stachys officinalis*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* and autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*. A variety of orchid species are found here including pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, early purple orchid *Orchis mascula* and bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*.

The diversity of the site is enhanced by patches of scrub, principally blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, and areas of broadleaved woodland. The woodland canopy is dominated by ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and beech *Fagus sylvatica* with an understorey of hazel *Corylus avellana*.

Coombe Hill is one of only three Sites of Special Scientific Interest in which the nationally rare limestone woundwort occurs. There is a cluster of past and present sites for limestone woundwort close to Wotton-under-Edge, one of only two areas in Britain where this plant is found. Limestone woundwort is a biennial or short lived perennial, which appears able to survive for long periods as seed in the ground. It is associated with woodland edge habitats and clearings and often appears after a period of disturbance or woodland management. It has declined in abundance since it was first discovered in this locality in 1897.

The site also supports a variety of butterflies including the characteristic Cotswold grassland species, small blue *Cupido minimus*, chalk hill blue *Lysandra coridon* and marbled white *Melanargia galathea*.

* A plant specially protected by Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.