

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE      SITE NAME: PORTON MEADOWS

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

Local Planning Authorities: SALISBURY DISTRICT COUNCIL, Wiltshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU 185362      Area: 17.6 (ha.) 43.6 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184      1:10,000: SU 13 NE

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Porton Meadows is an area of botanically rich unimproved neutral grassland lying on the floodplain of the River Bourne. The complex of small summer grazed pastures was formerly under water meadow management, whereby controlled flooding increased the sward growth rate. Today this approach has been abandoned, but it has been replaced by largely traditional farming methods rather than by modern intensive agricultural practices. Such management history is extremely uncommon in Britain. The site also includes small wooded areas and a stretch of the River Bourne.

Porton Meadows occupies an almost level valley bottom of alluvium overlying Upper Chalk. Although this situation naturally gives rise to perennially waterlogged ground, the effect is exacerbated by the often artificially high level of the River Bourne. The network of disused water meadow ditches traversing the site adds further to the wet nature of the grassland.

The meadows are extremely species-rich with common grasses occurring throughout the sward including crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, meadow fescue *F. pratensis* and rough meadow-grass *Poa trivialis*. In addition the turf contains quaking-grass *Briza media*, meadow brome *Bromus commutatus*, common sedge *Carex nigra*, carnation sedge *C. panicea* and brown sedge *C. disticha*, all of which are considered indicative of a long period of uninterrupted management without ploughing, herbicides and artificial fertilisers. Of interest is the presence of the fescue-rye-grass hybrid x *Festulolium loliaceum*, a plant associated particularly with a water meadow regime.

Many herbs typical of unimproved disused water meadows are widespread, for example marsh-marigold *Caltha palustris*, marsh ragwort *Senecio aquaticus*, southern marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*, early marsh-orchid *D. incarnata*, water avens *Geum rivale* and ragged-Robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*. Also present are an exceptional number of locally uncommon marshy grassland plants

including marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, bog pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*, marsh arrowgrass *Triglochin palustris* and long-stalked yellow-sedge *Carex lepidocarpa*. The wetter areas of swamp, ditch and river allow other species to flourish such as water-cress *Nasturtium officinale*, fool's water-cress *Apium nodiflorum*, brooklime *Veronica beccabunga*, reed sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima*, reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea* and greater pond-sedge *Carex riparia*.

Several areas of woodland and thick scrub occur in ungrazed parts of the site. The majority of mature trees are white willow and ash, while crack willow and pedunculate oak are less common. Grey willow is the most frequent shrub but further species include guelder rose, spindle, buckthorn, wild privet and elder. Some of the pastures are only lightly grazed and this has encouraged the development of scattered patches of hawthorn, dog rose and bramble.

The River Bourne is part of the Hampshire Avon river system which, as a whole, exhibits a greater range of habitat diversity and a more diverse flora and fauna than any other chalk river system in Britain. There has been no recent full survey of the River Bourne fauna but birds recorded include little grebe, moorhen, mute swan and kingfisher. In addition the meadows often hold wintering snipe and the woodland supports green and great spotted woodpecker as well as the commoner tits and warblers.