

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE

SITE NAME: PEWSEY DOWNS

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

Local Planning Authorities: Kennet District Council, Wiltshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU 113636  
SU 073639

Area: 305.3 (ha.) 754.4 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 173

1:10,000: SU 06 SE, SU 16 SW & SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951

Date of Last Revision: 1977

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In part a National Nature Reserve.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Pewsey Downs covers an extensive chalk downland scarp which supports an extremely rich chalk grassland flora and an outstanding butterfly fauna. On the escarpment top is a small ancient oak-ash-maple wood with uncommon stand types.

The site lies on the southern edge of the Marlborough Downs and has developed on mainly Middle and Lower Chalk with a clay-with-flints capping in places. The steep chalk escarpment is indented by a number of impressive coombes and dry valleys which provide a varied topography. Much of the turf is razed and is dominated by a sheep's fescue -- meadow oat-grass *Festuca ovina* -- *Avenula pratense* community, although in some areas upright brome *Bromus erectus* grassland is the dominant type. Many herbs characteristic of Wiltshire downland are widespread such as devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, ox-eye daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* and chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*. Orchids are also well represented and include fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, lesser butterfly-orchid *Platanthera bifolia*, bee orchid *Ophrys apifera* and autumn lady's-tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*. The nationally rare tuberous thistle *Cirsium tuberosum* occurs with other plants of restricted distribution such as early gentian *Gentianella anglica*, bastard-toadflax *Thesium humifusum*, burnt-tip orchid *Orchis ustulata*, round-headed rampion *Phyteuma tenerum* and field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius*.

The clay-with-flints capping of the escarpment has given rise to a neutral to acidic turf. Here, the unimproved remnants are characterised by gorse *Ulex europaeus* and other acid loving plants such as tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, pignut *Conopodium majus*, heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and heather *Calluna vulgaris*. On some of the numerous anthills here, the uncommon little mouse-ear *Cerastium semidecandrum*, sea mouse-ear *C. diffusum* and the rare dwarf mouse-ear *C. pumilum* are present.

Most of the scarp is scrub-free, but the eastern section supports scattered patches of mixed downland scrub including a wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana*, yew *Taxus baccata* and juniper *Juniperus communis*. Associated with the scrub are herbs such as hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum officinale* and sweet violet *Viola odorata*.

Dominating this end of the escarpment top is Gopher Wood which, although small, is one of the best remaining examples of dry ash-maple woodland in north Wiltshire. Part of the scarp slope is dense over-mature coppice of hazel *Corylus avellana*, while other areas have a canopy of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and field maple *Acer campestre*. On the deeper and heavier soils on the plateau there is much coppice of both pedunculate and sessile oak

*Quercus robur* and *Q. petraea* and their hybrids. Associated with hybrid oaks on the rim of the scarp is a stand of small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata*. The wood supports a rich ground flora with green hellebore *Helleborus viridis*, toothwort *Lathraea squamaria*, herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia* and Solomon's-seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*.

The site is of considerable entomological interest and supports 28 resident breeding species of butterfly. Large populations of chalkhill blue *Lysandra coridon* occur along with the uncommon dark green fritillary *Argynnis aglaja*, marsh fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia* and Duke of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina*. Other invertebrate groups are less well studied, but a number of uncommon species have been noted. These include the plant bugs *Hardya melanopsis*, *Ulopa trivialis* and *Sehirus dubius* which feeds on bastard-toadflax, the moth *Cydia caecana* and the snail *Abida secale*.

The specially protected warty newt *Triturus cristatus* breeds in some of the remaining dew ponds.