

**County:** Wiltshire                      **Site Name:** Prescombe Down

**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:**                 ST 985255

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:59,000:** 184                      **1:10,000:** ST 92 NE be SE

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):** 1951                      **Date of Last Revision:** 1975

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1987                      **Date of Last Revision:**

**Area:** 76.22 ha

**Other Information:** The SSSI includes the Prescombe Down National Nature Reserve. The site lies within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

#### **Description and Reasons for Notification:**

Prescombe Down is a botanically rich downland site with a flora characteristic of the south and south-west chalk grassland. Much of the vegetation is dominated by a nationally restricted sedge species and the fine sward comprises a wide diversity of herbs and grasses. In addition the downland supports a rich butterfly community, including some scarce species. Such extensive areas of unimproved calcareous grassland have become increasingly rare with the intensification of agriculture and are vulnerable to further development.

The site consists of a deep, forking, coombe system eroded into an escarpment of the Upper Chalk, lying to the west of Salisbury. The steep sides of the dry valleys exhibit a variety of aspect which is reflected in the species composition of the turf. South and south-west facing slopes are dominated by sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* and the nationally scarce dwarf sedge *Carex humilis*. In contrast, on north and north-east facing slopes sheep's-fescue is co-dominant with glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*. Red fescue *Festuca rubra* is generally abundant and many other grasses, such as hairy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens*, quaking grass *Briza media* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* are widespread. Heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens* and spreading meadow-grass *Poa subcaerulea*, a species uncommon in southern England, also occur.

Chalk herbs typical of the Wiltshire downland are well represented in the sward. Species such as harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum* and salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* are common throughout, whereas others, including horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica* and the scarce endemic early gentian *Gentianella anglica* are more restricted to the warm south-facing slopes and sheltered coombes. Here too, autumn lady's-tresses *Spiranthes spiralis* is unusually abundant. Certain species present on the Down are considered to be indicative of a long period of management without ploughing, fertiliser or herbicides, among them dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, clustered bellflower *Campanula*

*glomerata*, sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia* and chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*. The diversity of the habitat is increased by the mixed calcareous scrub occurring in dense clumps at the northern extremities of the site.

Prescombe Down supports almost twenty resident butterfly species, among them the uncommon adonis blue. Dingy skipper, grizzled skipper, brown argus, chalkhill blue and marsh fritillary all breed on the site and dark green fritillary is occasionally recorded. Other species of the invertebrate fauna have received only limited attention, although the downland is known to be an excellent location for the wood tiger moth *Parasemia plantaginis* and past surveys have revealed the presence of the scarce bug *Anakelisia perspicillata*. Anthills, formed by the yellow meadow ant *Lasius flavus* are abundant on some slopes. A variety of birds frequent the site including garden warbler, blackcap, whitethroat, corn bunting and bullfinch. Buzzard, kestrel, sparrowhawk, little owl and wheatear are also regular visitors.