

**County:** Wiltshire

**Site Name:** Upton Cow Down

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

**Local Planning Authorities:** West Wiltshire District Council Wiltshire County Council

**National Grid Reference:** ST 875 491

**Area:** 16.4 ha 40.5 acres

**Ordnance Survey Sheet** 1:50,000: 183

1:10,000: ST 84 NE

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):**

**Date of Last Revision:**

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1989

**Notification date:** 26 March 1993

**Other Information:**

Half of site MOD property.

**Description and Reasons for Notification:**

Upton Cow Down is an area of botanically rich chalk grassland at the extreme western end of Salisbury Plain. The Plain is the largest expanse of unimproved chalk grassland in north-west Europe. Elsewhere in Britain some 80% of this habitat has been lost or damaged since 1940, largely through agricultural intensification.

The site occupies a predominantly north-west facing scarp of moderate to steep gradient on the Lower and Middle Chalk.

The main chalk grassland community present is characterised by the grass upright brome *Bromus erectus* with many herbs characteristic of lime rich areas such as squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa* and chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*. This type of community is found over chalk throughout southern England and is particularly associated with Wiltshire.

The sward is composed mainly of upright brome and sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, with red fescue *F. rubra*, quaking grass *Briza media* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* also abundant. Glaucus sedge *Carex flacca* and spring sedge *C. caryophyllea* are both common. The turf contains a high proportion of herbs with dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*, cowslip *Primula veris* and autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*. Orchids are well represented with common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea*, pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and fly *Ophrys insectifera* all suggesting a long history of management without ploughing, fertiliser or herbicide. Of particular note is the large population of bastard toadflax *Thesium humifusum*, a plant which in Britain is confined to the southern chalk.

Anthills made by the yellow meadow ant *Lasius flavus* are prominent on the site and support a characteristic flora with species such as rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, ladies bedstraw *Galium verum* and wild thyme *Thymus praecox*.

Scattered scrub composed of hawthorn, elder, dog rose and bramble occurs throughout the site. In the north-west corner of the site the scrub grades into a small area of mature woodland dominated by beech with ash, sycamore and hazel.

The site supports a diverse chalk downland butterfly fauna. Of particular note are adonis blue and marsh fritillary both of which are uncommon in Britain. Other butterflies recorded include small blue, chalkhill blue, dingy skipper and dark green fritillary.

Birds using the grassland include red-legged partridge, skylark and meadow pipit. Those using both grassland and scrub include kestrel, yellowhammer and corn bunting with fieldfare and redwing in the winter. The small area of woodland supports woodcock, green woodpecker and great spotted woodpecker, the last two both breeding in dead beeches. As well as a large population of rabbits the down supports brown hare and fox.

An active badger sett is present on the site and roe deer are found in the scrub.