

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE      SITE NAME: STEEPLE LANGFORD 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: SU 036387/SU 042383      Area: 21.75 (ha.) 53.74 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184      1:10,000: SU 03 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971      Date of Last Revision: 1977

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

Other Information:

Partly within the Cranbourne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Steeple Langford Down is an area of exceptionally herb-rich chalk grassland supporting several plant species that have a restricted distribution in Britain. Such floristically diverse grasslands are a valuable remnant of a habitat which has been much reduced by agricultural intensification.

The site occupies part of a valley formed in the Upper and Middle Chalk at the southern edge of Salisbury Plain. The moderate to steep slopes have a variety of aspects.

The regularly grazed turf is extremely rich with up to 43 species having been recorded per square metre. The most abundant grasses throughout much of the site are sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* and meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* with quaking-grass *Briza media* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* also widespread. Tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* is found in occasional patches. There is a very high proportion of herb species, particularly devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* and small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*. Glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring-sedge *C. caryophyllea* are both common and dwarf sedge *C. humilis*, a species highly characteristic of south Wiltshire chalk but of a very limited distribution elsewhere in Britain, grows in abundance over much of the down. A large number of species considered indicative of calcareous grassland that has not been agriculturally improved by ploughing, fertilisers, or herbicides, are typical components of the vegetation. These include betony *Stachys officinalis*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata* and the native form of sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia*. There are also populations of field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius*, burnt orchid *Orchis ustulata* and bastard-toadflax *Thesium humifusum* all of which are restricted in national distribution.

On the north facing slope upright brome *Bromus erectus* becomes the dominant grass. The associated community comprises many of the aforementioned herbs but has a greater proportion of grasses, including sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens* and crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*.

Steeple Langford Down is largely free from trees and scrub though there are a few clumps of hawthorn, blackthorn, buckthorn, elder and dog rose.

The rich and varied flora is reflected by the diversity of invertebrates. Many common species of butterfly are present such as meadow brown, brimstone and gatekeeper together with specifically downland species, for example, the chalkhill blue. Beetles (Coleoptera) and true bugs (Hemiptera) are well represented. The vertebrate fauna has not been greatly studied, though birds dependent on the site include kestrel, grey partridge, skylark, swallow and house martin.