

“Duke” hangs on in Wildlife Sites

Recent surveys by Wiltshire butterfly enthusiasts suggest that the Duke of Burgundy, a small butterfly found both on chalk downland and occasionally along sunny rides in woodland, has been lost from almost three quarters of its Wiltshire sites in the last 25 years. It would appear however, that of the remaining populations, more are found on Wildlife Sites than the better protected Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

One possible reason for this is that “the Duke” has very precise habitat requirements and may not be served well by SSSI management regimes, where downland sites are often close-grazed to favour low-growing plants and other butterfly species which depend on them. The caterpillars feed exclusively on the leaves of Cowslip on grassland (and of Primrose in woods) and eggs are laid only in less well-grazed areas where the leaves can grow large.

In addition, the adult males need taller grasses or scrub in sheltered, sunny locations on which to

display during a brief flight period in early summer.

On severely under-grazed sites, however, food plants can be either out-competed by grasses, or lost under too much scrub.

Of 126 sites where the Duke of Burgundy was recorded in the 1980s, only 23 were found to have any in 2006. Of these, 16 were Wildlife Sites and seven were SSSI (counting the Salisbury Plain training area as three very large sites). A number of sites were not surveyed last year and further work is planned for 2007. The Wildlife Sites Project hope to assist with the survey again this year and we may be contacting the owners of suitable sites in the spring.

If you would like to assist with the survey, or have a site that you feel may be suitable for the Duke of Burgundy, or **for further information, please contact Rob Large.**



Duke of Burgundy, Tony Wells

Useful contacts

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**Natural England
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**Forestry Commission
Wiltshire Office** (for English
Woodland Grant Scheme
www.forestry.gsi.gov.uk
Tel: (01672) 511767

**FWAG (Farming and Wildlife
Advisory Group)**
www.fwag.org.uk, Tel: (01225) 777839

Barn Owl Centre
www.barnowl.co.uk,
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Hawk and Owl Trust
www.hawkandowl.org,
Tel: (01225) 744290

Game Conservancy Trust
www.gct.org.uk,
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Forestry Commission
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**Royal Society for the
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The Peewit

The newsletter of the Wildlife Sites Project



Chalk downland – a Wiltshire speciality

Herb-rich grassland on free-draining, low-fertility chalk soil is not uncommon in Wiltshire. In fact, nearly 30,000 hectares remain in the county. So why is this habitat a priority for conservationists?

First, it is severely threatened. Nationally, up to 80 percent has been lost since World War II, mainly as a result of agricultural intensification. It is, also, truly a Wiltshire speciality, as around three quarters of all chalk grassland in the UK is found here. Indeed, it is thought that Wiltshire



David Hall/WWT

Chalk downland, Chetcombe Bottom

Welcome to the fifth edition of the Peewit, produced annually for owners and managers of Wildlife Sites in Wiltshire. There are around 1,600 of these special sites, covering some 21,500 ha or around six percent of the area of the county, representing some of the most important wildlife habitats. This year we are focussing on chalk downland, a habitat found on as many as 600 sites in the county. This newsletter is distributed to all those involved in the management of sites visited by the Wildlife Sites Project. It aims to keep you informed of the opportunities to maintain and enhance your Wildlife Site.

has nearly half of the remaining *global* resource.

The most obvious feature of chalk downland is its spectacular diversity. Well-managed examples can support sixty or more species of plant in a single square metre, many of which can survive in no other habitat, and some of Britain's rarest plants can be highly abundant where conditions are suitable. This diversity of flora in turn supports a huge array of specialist invertebrates.

Lowland Calcareous Grassland, of which chalk downland is one variety, is listed as a Priority Habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), and also in the Wiltshire and Swindon Local BAPs. This means that conservation bodies and Local Authorities should attempt to prevent any further loss and encourage the restoration and re-creation of chalk grassland on suitable sites.

The 600 or so Wildlife Sites which contain remnants of chalk grassland are a vital part of this process. They offer a source of seeds, and of animals to re-colonise new sites, and also a repository of management expertise. In addition, they are an essential component of the beautiful Wiltshire landscape.

Managing Chalk Grassland

- Chalk downland sites in Wiltshire are often too steep to mow. Grazing should remove all of this year's growth and reduce sward height to 5-15cm by the start of the new growing season. Light summer grazing encourages low-growing plants, but remove or reduce sheep grazing between early May and late June to allow flowers to seed (earlier if cowslips are present). Avoid disturbance to ground-nesting birds. Do not graze when wet as poaching encourages "weed" species.
- Grazing should ideally be by sheep, cattle or a mixture of the two. Cattle produce a range of sward heights, favouring a variety of invertebrates, while sheep produce a closer, more even result. Horses' hooves can damage the roots of perennial plants. Rabbit grazing can produce a fine, short sward on small sites, but populations may need controlling.
- Scattered scrub offers perching, nesting and feeding sites for birds. Graze to control the spread of scrub, but occasional cutting and treatment may be necessary.
- Downland plants need very low fertility. Use no chemical fertilisers and avoid spreading farmyard manure. Grazing stock will normally produce enough manure for maintenance.

- Supplementary feeding should not take place on flower-rich grassland as it will encourage poaching and the introduction of unwanted weed seeds.
- Anthills are an important component of downland diversity. Do not harrow, or mechanically top weeds in areas with anthills, or allow scrub to encroach.
- Where thistles or ragwort become a problem, use light summer grazing to reduce the height of surrounding vegetation then top or pull, or apply a suitable specific herbicide using a knapsack sprayer for scattered plants, or weed-wipe for larger patches. Never blanket-spray with any herbicide.



David Hall/MWT

What does "Wildlife Site" mean?

The recognition of land as a Wildlife Site has a number of implications for landowners and managers. These include:

- Wildlife sites are targeted for management grant aid, for example by Higher Level Stewardship.
- Free advice is available on site management for wildlife.
- Management is in the control of owners and managers made aware of the conservation importance of the site by the project officers. It is hoped that they will manage their land in a way that will benefit wildlife.
- No restrictions are placed on agricultural operations, although we may advise against activities that are potentially damaging to wildlife.
- For any substantial changes in land-use on a Wildlife Site, local authorities take wildlife into account, together with all other planning considerations.
- Site details are not published, apart from their location in some local development plans.
- No additional rights of access are created; access is by permission only.
- Land with recognised wildlife importance may have an increased sale value.

If you have any comments, or require further information, please contact Rob Large, Wildlife Sites Officer - details on the back page.

Need grazing stock?

One of the most commonly reported problems with management of grassland Wildlife Sites is the difficulty of locating grazing stock. Changes in farming practices mean that fewer landowners now keep any livestock of their own and downland sites are frequently neglected, becoming rank and scrubby.

The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has sponsored a project, in association with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), to provide a service allowing landowners and graziers to make contact. The website www.sheepkeep.co.uk is a one-stop-shop for everything related to grazing animals. You can register if you have land to graze, or spare grazing capacity (or you can call (01993) 886567).

Grazing animal projects have also been established in other parts of the county. **To find out if there is one which might help you, visit www.grazinganimalsproject.org**

Jacobs Sheep



Rare gentian rediscovered

The nationally scarce Chiltern Gentian (*Gentianella germanica*) has been rediscovered on a Wildlife Site near Mere after over 100 years. This attractive little plant flowers on short-grazed chalk downland in the late summer. In the UK it is restricted to chalk sites from Hampshire northwards, but most are found in the Chiltern Hills in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. It was last recorded in Mere in 1891 and was considered to be extinct in the county until nine plants were recently found by Dr Tim Rich of the National Museum of Wales.

This brings the number of Gentian species currently known to occur in Wiltshire to three, along with the Early- and Autumn Gentians (*G. anglica* and *G. amarella*), both of which also grow at the same site. Management of the land at Mere has been supported for over a decade by an Environmentally Sensitive Area agreement, the prescriptions of which were determined in part by the presence of Early Gentian, a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species. The same management is also suitable for the Chiltern Gentian. The Wildlife Sites Project



Gentianella germanica, Dr Tim Rich

has been helping with an application for future assistance under the Higher Level Stewardship scheme.