

COUNTY: EAST SUSSEX SITE NAME: ASHDOWN FOREST

DISTRICT: WEALDEN

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Part of the site is a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) managed by the Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation

Local Planning Authority: WEALDEN DISTRICT COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 450300 Area: 3144.6 (ha.) 7770.3 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 187, 188 1:10,000: TQ 33 SE, TQ 43 SW,
TQ 43 SE, TQ 42 NW,
TQ 43 NE, TQ 53 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1953 Date of Last Revision: 1972

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

The site is mentioned in 'A Nature Conservation Review'*, and is common land, managed by the Ashdown Forest Conservators.

Reasons for Notification:

Ashdown Forest is an extensive area of common land lying between East Grinstead and Crowborough. The soils are derived from the predominantly sandy Hastings Beds. It is one of the largest single continuous blocks of heath, semi-natural woodland and valley bog in south-east England, and it supports several uncommon plants, a rich invertebrate fauna, and important populations of heath and woodland birds.

Although the area of heathland has declined in recent years due to cessation of grazing and frequent fires, there remain extensive areas of dry heath dominated by ling *Calluna vulgaris* with bell heather *Erica cinerea* and dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*. This heathland supports important lichen communities including species such as *Pycnothelia papillaria*. Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* is now dominant over large areas. On the damper heath, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* becomes dominant with deer-grass *Trichophorum cespitosum*. The heath and bracken communities form a mosaic with acid grassland dominated by purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* with species such as the local petty whin *Genista anglica*. Wet areas provide suitable conditions for several species of sphagnum moss, together with which are found bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*, common cotton-grass *Eriophorum angustifolium* and specialities such as marsh gentian *Gentiana pneumonanthe*, ivy-leaved bell flower *Wahlenbergia hederacea*, white-beaked sedge *Rhynchospora alba* and the marsh clubmoss *Lycopodiella inundata*.

Gorse *Ulex europaeus*, silver birch *Betula pendula*, pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* are scattered across the heath, and in some areas form extensive secondary woodland and scrub. The older woodlands consist of beech *Fagus*

sylvatica and sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa*. These contain bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, the hard fern *Blechnum spicant*, and honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* with birds-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis* and violet helleborine *Epipactis purpurata* found particularly under beech.

There are some conifer and sweet chestnut coppice plantations scattered throughout the forest, with rides of particular importance for heathland plants, and various woodland birds such as sparrowhawk.

Forest streams are often lined by alders *Alnus glutinosa* with grey willow *Salix cinerea*, birch and oak. These streams cut through the soft sandstone in places, forming steep sided valleys (ghylls) which are sheltered from winter frosts and remain humid in summer. Uncommon bryophytes such as the liverwort *Nardia compressa* and a range of ferns including the mountain fern *Oreopteris limbosperma* and the hay-scented buckler fern *Dryopteris aemula* thrive in this 'atlantic' microclimate.

The damming of streams, digging for marl, and quarrying have produced several large ponds in a number of areas of the forest. Although often largely free of aquatic vegetation there may be localised rafts of broadleaved pondweed *Potamogeton natans*, beds of reedmace *Typha latifolia* and water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile*. These species are particularly abundant in the marl pits.

The aquatic habitats support a diverse fauna, including a range of water beetles (Coleoptera) a rare midge *Dixella filiformis*, a diversity of dragonfly and damselfly species (Odonata) and the locally uncommon snail *Vertigo substriata*. Some of the ponds also have large amphibian populations, including the great-crested newt *Triturus cristatus*. The heathlands and woods support many uncommon beetles, moths and butterflies. There are still several populations of the rare silver-studded blue *Plebejus argus* on the open heath. The bog bush cricket *Metrioptera brachyptera* is particularly abundant in the forest also. Large populations of reptiles, including the viviparous lizard *Lacerta vivipara* and the adder *Vipera berus* occur on the open habitats. Notable heath nesting birds include curlew, nightjar and hobby. Scrub, woodlands and coppice together support a wide range of breeding woodland birds, and a refuge for the dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*, which has become scarce over large areas of the country in recent years.

* A Nature Conservation Review, 1977; ed D R Ratcliffe; published by Cambridge University Press.