COUNTY: NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  SITE NAME: BIRCH SPINNEY & MAWSLEY MARSH

District: Kettering

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

Local Planning Authority: Kettering Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SP 809767

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 141  1:10,000: SP 87 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1959  Date of Last Revision: 1970

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1984  Date of Last Revision:

Area: 13.2 ha 32.6 ac

Other Information: The site area has been extended to include the southern banks of the stream, part of the dismantled railway course and a spinney.

Description and Reasons for Notification

A small valley comprising a unique mixture of wildlife habitats, most of which are threatened throughout the East Midlands.

Birch Spinney is an unusual woodland type partly developed on peat and no other examples are known in the county. Unimproved and botanically-rich grasslands adjoin one of the finest remaining Northamptonshire marshes - a habitat which has declined significantly in recent times. The unpolluted stream, hedges, springs and flushes add to the interest of the area.

The variety of vegetation types is due to the complex geology and hydrology. Birch Spinney is a variant of ash-maple woodland developed on light soils with poor drainage. The canopy is formed of ash Fraxinus excelsior, pedunculate oak Quercus robur and downy birch Betula pubescens over a shrub layer of hawthorn Corylus avellana, elder Sambucus nigra and goat willow Salix caprea. The ground flora is notable for the abundance of ferns. Ragsdale Spinney is by contrast a heavy soil form of wet ash-wych elm woodland. Its situation on a spring-line gives rise to a rich ground flora including the locally rare giant bellflower Campanula latifolia.

The grassland is of a geographically-widespread calcareous loam type which in Northamptonshire is now virtually confined to sloping sites where obstacles remain to intensive farming. The sward comprises a large number of herbs and grasses characterised by sweet vernal grass Anthoxanthum odoratum, crested dog’s tail Cynosurus cristatus, quaking grass Briza media, yellow oat-grass Trisetum flavescens, harebell Campanula rotundifolia, dwarf thistle Cirsium acaule and salad burnet Sanguisorba minor. There are several damp flushes on the slopes which enhance the botanical interest and numerous ant hills.

Along the waterlogged valley floor there is an almost continuous linear strip of marshy grassland where rushes, sedges, grasses and herbs are all locally dominant. The more abundant species include blunt-flowered rush Juncus subnodulosus, bulbous rush J. bulbosus, jointed rush J. articulatus, false foxtail C. otrubae, water horsetail Equisetum fluviatile, water mint Mentha aquatica and common fleabane Pulicaria dysenterica.

Of the less common species tussock sedge Carex paniculata, marsh arrow grass Triglochin palustris and marsh valerian Valeriana dioica are noteworthy.

The value of the site for birds and insects is increased by the mixed tree and shrub cover of the stream banks, overgrown hedgerows and railway embankment.

One of the few farmland localities of breeding snipe in the county.