

**Site name:** Rampisham Down

**County:** Dorset

**District:** West Dorset

**Status:** Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as substituted by Schedule 9 to the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

**Local Planning Authority:** West Dorset District Council, Dorset County Council

**National grid reference:** ST547010

**Area:** 71.98 ha

**Ordnance Survey sheets:** **1:50,000:**

**1:10,000:** ST 50 SW, SE

**Notification date:** **22 August 2013**

### Reasons for notification:

Rampisham Down is of special interest by reason of its nationally important lowland acid grassland and lowland heathland habitats, dominated by examples of the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) type U4 sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* – heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* grassland, occurring in a mosaic with small areas of lowland heathland of the NVC types H4 western gorse *Ulex gallii* – bristle bent *Agrostis curtisii* heath and H8 heather *Calluna vulgaris* – western gorse *Ulex gallii* heath, as well as areas of transitional grass/heath communities.

### General description:

Rampisham Down is located on a high plateau with land sloping gently towards the south to south-west. The whole site is above 200m, being 220m at its highest point, and sits above the Powerstock Vale, in west Dorset. The underlying geology is upper chalk but over much of the site this is overlain by superficial deposits of clay with flints giving rise to free-draining largely acidic soils.

A large expanse of open grassland covers the majority of the plateau, with small stands of heath amongst the grassland. Since World War II, Rampisham Down has remained for the most part as an extensive open grassland plain. During the site's time as a radio transmitting station, the vegetation was grazed by sheep and stands of heath and scrub were cut to maintain short vegetation around the transmitting aerials. The lower slopes towards the south of Rampisham Down show clear evidence of enclosure and agricultural management, with the remains of hedges and banks indicating previous field boundaries.

Rampisham Down supports the largest area of lowland acid grassland found in Dorset and is one of the largest areas of its type in the country. The site also supports small stands of lowland heathland and transitional grassland/heathland plant communities. The large size of this site, which has for the most part escaped any modern-day agricultural improvement, is unusual. There is also very little acid grassland and associated heathland habitat remaining over the chalk in Dorset; most of what remains is fragmented in small patches.

The extensive sweep of acid grassland is typically dominated by fine grasses, such as common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire-fog *Holcus lanatus*, sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina* and, more locally, heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*, spreading meadow-grass *Poa humilis* and brown bent *Agrostis vinealis*, as well as frequent field wood-rush *Luzula campestris*. Sedge species typically include spring-sedge *Carex caryophylla* and pill sedge *C. pilulifera*, with occasional glaucous sedge *C. flacca*.

Characteristic broad-leaved herbs generally occurring throughout the site and typical of the unimproved acid grassland include tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile*, pignut *Conopodium majus* and birds-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*. Less frequent, but still present in many stands, are heath milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*, common dog-violet *Viola riviniana*, mouse-ear-hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum*, heath speedwell *Veronica officinalis*, western gorse

*Ulex gallii* and yarrow *Achillea millefolium*. Additional herbs, which are sometimes locally frequent or prominent in the sward due to their stature include rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, heath spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*, common sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata*. The uncommon heath dog-violet *Viola canina* occurs in a few places, as do betony *Betonica officinalis* and harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*. Some stands within the acid grasslands show a more calcareous element to the flora, with species such as dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, quaking-grass *Briza media*, downy oat-grass *Helictotrichon pubescens* and lady's bedstraw *Galium verum* present within the sward.

There are small, well-defined stands of lowland heathland occurring mainly on the higher plateau of the site. These stands are picked out by the ericaceous shrubs, heather *Calluna vulgaris* and bell heather *Erica cinerea*, as well as western gorse. Associated herbs include tormentil, heath bedstraw, heath milkwort, mouse-ear hawkweed, slender St John's-wort *Hypericum pulchrum* and locally bird's-foot-trefoil. Grasses and sedges within these stands are characterised by species such as frequent heath-grass, brown bent, pill sedge and, on damper ground, purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*.

On the eastern side, on the high plateau of Rampisham Down, small areas of acid grassland show signs of being transitional with heathland communities. Here, ericaceous shrubs are largely absent but western gorse *Ulex gallii* occurs with a more typical heathland herb component (as described above) and, most distinctively, with frequent lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*.

Several small stands of relatively species-rich bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* dominated vegetation occur between the plateau and southern slopes, mainly along former hedge banks and boundary edges.