COUNTY: OXFORDSHIRE SITE NAME: CHINNOR HILL

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

1981

Local Planning Authorities: South Oxfordshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SP766007

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 165 1:10,000: SP70 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1972 Date of Last Revision: 1977

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

Area: 27.3 ha 67.4 ac

Description and Reasons for Notification

Chinnor Hill, situated on the northern edge of the Chilterns escarpment, supports examples of the species-rich calcareous grassland and mixed scrub communities which have declined in area in Oxfordshire this century, together with stands of juniper scrub, an uncommon habitat with a distinct invertebrate fauna. The site has a diverse flora, with over 300 vascular plants recorded, including some uncommon species, and supports a diverse community of breeding and wintering bird

The site lies on the chalk plateau, which is capped with clay-with-flints, and plunges steeply at the point where the Icknield Way crosses the site. Shallow, well-drained calcareous silty soils of the Upton Series cover the scarp slopes.

The chalk grassland supports a rich calcicolous sward in which meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* is abundant, together with hairy oat-grass *A. pubescens*, small cat's-tail *Phleum bertolonii* and narrow-leaved meadow grass *Poa angustifolia*. False oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* occurs in less heavily grazed areas. Herbaceous plants present include yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*. Of particular note are candytuft *Iberis amara*, a species which in Britain is largely confined to Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, Chiltern gentian *Gentianella germanica*, a plant associated with the southern chalk and with a distribution centred on the Chilterns, and frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, which is uncommon in Oxfordshire.

An area of chalk grassland lying along the south side of the Icknield Way has a range of wild rose species comprising dogrose *Rosa canina*, sweet briar *R. rubiginosa*, lesser sweetbriar *R. micrantha* and burnet rose *R. pimpinellifolia*, at one of its few inland localities in central southern England.

Large areas of the site are covered by dense mixed scrub of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, elder *Sambucus nigra*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, spindle *Euonymus europaeus*, buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus*, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana*, guelder rose *V. opulus*, hazel *Corylus avellana* and traveller's joy *Clematis vitalba*.

Mixed deciduous woodland has established in some areas, consisting largely of ash, beech, yew and whitebeam. There are two small beechwoods at the top of the hill, with a sparse ground flora which includes dog's mercury *Mercurialis* perennis and sanicle *Sanicula europaea*.

Juniper *Juniperus communis*, a species which has contracted its British range in recent years and is uncommon in Oxfordshire, is a prominent component of the shrub and predominates over some areas of grassland. There is a specialised insect fauna associated with juniper scrub which includes the juniper shield bug *Cyphostethus tristriatus*, the mirid bug *Dichroscytus valesianus*, the chalcid wasp *Megastigmus bipunctatus* and the gall midge *Schmidtiella gemmatum*. Such faunas are becoming nationally restricted due to loss of suitable habitat. Other insects recorded from the woodland and scrub-grassland habitats include the green hairstreak, white admiral and marbled white butterflies.

Sixty-five species of bird have been recorded and large populations of passerines breed in the scrub habitat. Fieldfares, redwings and other thrushes feed on the wide variety of berries present during winter.