COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: WHITE SHUTE

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

1981

**Local Planning Authorities:** Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU330773

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU37 NW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987 Date of Last Revision:

Area: 2.0 ha 5.0 ac

## **Description and Reasons for Notification**

An area of chalk downland on a steep south-west facing slope situated near the River Lambourn in west Berkshire. Following extensive agricultural improvement of the Berkshire Downs, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, surviving remnants of chalk grassland have become very small and highly fragmented. This site consists of herb-rich grassland and also mature mixed scrub, which has developed due to lack of grazing. These habitats are important for birds and insects, especially butterflies.

The sward is dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus* and other grasses including sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, crested hair-grass *Keoleria macrantha*, downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* and quaking grass *Briza media*. Also present are glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and field woodrush *Luzula campestris*.

The site supports a large number of characteristic herbs of chalk grassland, many of which are normally only found on unimproved and traditionally managed sites. The most abundant species include salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, lady's bed-straw *Galium verum*, harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus* and greater knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*. Also present are common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* and chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*. Wild orchids recorded include common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, southern marsh *D. praetermissa* and fragrant orchids *Gymnadenia conopsea*.

Areas of scrub consist of hawthorn, hazel, ash, blackthorn and elder, with a variety of other shrubs and trees typical of southern chalk, including buckthorn, wild privet, wayfaring tree, guelder rose and whitebeam.

These habitats are locally important for birds and insects because so little cover has survived in this intensively managed landscape. A large number of butterfly species has been recorded at White Shute, including several which are now rapidly declining in Britain due to loss of suitable habitats. The site supports a population of the uncommon Duke of Burgundy, a butterfly which prefers scrubby areas on calcareous grasslands and is now mainly confined to central southern England. The caterpillars feed on cowslip *Primula veris*. Other species present include small blue, brown argus, chalkhill blue, green hairstreak, dingy skipper and grizzled skipper. These are typical of chalk and limestone grassland where suitable foodplants grow. The caterpillars of chalkhill blue feed solely on horseshoe vetch and the small blue on flower heads of kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*.