

COUNTY: SOMERSET

SITE NAME:THE QUANTOCKS

DISTRICT: WEST SOMERSET, SEDGEMOOR, TAUNTON DEANE

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

Local Planning Authority: Somerset County Council, West Somerset District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council

National Grid Reference: ST 140390 Area: 2506.9 (ha) 6194.5 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 181 1:10,000: ST 14 SW SE ST 13 NW NE SE

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

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

Other Information:

Site name changed from North Quantocks. Site boundary amended. Holford and Hodder's Combes are Nature Conservation Review Woodland sites. The site falls within the boundary of the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Part of the site is Common Land and parts are owned and managed by the Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation and the National Trust.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This site is one of the most extensive areas of semi-natural habitat in South West England. A wide variety of habitats are present, including dry dwarf-shrub heath, wet dwarf-shrub heath, acidic flushes, ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland and dense scrub. A number of plants with a local distribution in Somerset occur, and the site also supports an outstanding bird fauna. Although the invertebrate interest of the area has not been examined in great detail, a number of nationally important species have already been recorded.

The Quantocks are a range of hills which run for approximately twelve miles in a north-westerly direction from Taunton to the north Somerset coast. The steep slopes are deeply dissected and some of the resultant combes are heavily wooded. Tree cover is almost entirely absent above 250m. The highest point of the hills is 384m at Wills Neck. The underlying rocks are all of Devonian age. Soils over most of the site are derived from hard sandstones of the Hangman Grits strata, or from softer rocks of the Slates and Grits of the Ilfracombe Beds. Podsollic soils of the Manod and Larkbarrow Associations have developed on the plateau and slopes, while brown earths of the Rivington 2 Association have developed in the wooded combes.

The Quantocks support extensive areas of a wide range of traditionally managed heathland communities. Wet dwarf-shrub heath dominated by Heather *Calluna vulgaris* occurs on areas where drainage is impeded. Sub-dominants include Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* and Wavy Hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa*. A number of lichens and mosses are associated with this community. There are many

stands intermediate between this heath type and a very different community occurring on drier soils. This dry dwarf-shrub heath community is dominated by Bell Heather *Erica cinerea*, Western Gorse *Ulex galli* and Bristle Bent *Agrostis curtisii*. Other species include Bilberry, the very local Dodder *Cuscuta epithimum*, Heath Milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*, Green-ribbed Sedge *Carex binervis* and small quantities of Heather. A different dry dwarf-shrub heath community occurs on moderately well drained soils on the plateau. Heather is dominant, with Bilberry and Wavy Hair-grass present as sub-dominants. Other species include Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina*, Common Cow-wheat *Malampyrum pratense* and the mosses *Pseudoscleropodium purum* and *Dicranum scoparium*. An outstanding feature of the Quantock heathlands is that the dwarf-shrub communities are represented by a wide range of age classes.

Bracken *Pteridium equilinum* is common on well drained deeper soils. However, Bracken seldom achieves complete dominance and is often associated with Bilberry and Wavy hair-grass, or a more species-rich community that also includes Common Cow-wheat, Sheep's-fescue, Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris*, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Heath Bedstraw *Galium sextatile*, and the mosses *Pleurosium schreberi* and *Hypnum jutlandicum*.

Acidic flushes have developed at the sources of many of the springs and alongside some of the streams. Species typical of this habitat include: Bog Pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*, Round-leaved Sundew *Drosera rotundifolia* Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium*, Common Spike-rush *Eleocharis palustris*, Cross-leaved Heath, Marsh Pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*, Star sedge *Carex echinata*, Mat-grass *Nardus stricta* and *Sphagnum spp.*

Much of the woodland within the site is ancient and semi-natural, with three major stand types. Birch/Sessile Oak woodland is present in Holford Combe, Hodder's Combe, Shervage Wood and Five Lords where Sessile Oak *Quercus petraea* dominates the canopy. Understorey species include Downy Birch *Betula pubescens*, Holly *Ilax aquifolium*, Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*, and Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*. The ground flora tends to be dominated by Wavy Hair-grass, Bilberry and Common Cow-wheat but Hairy Wood-rush *Luzula pilosa*, Honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* and Heather are also present. These woodlands have an interesting management history. They used to be managed as coppice for charcoal production and tanning and with the exception of the more exposed portions that are severely wind-pruned, are now developing into high forest. A number of the standards have been pollarded in the past. Alfoxton Wood supports a magnificent stand of mature Sessile Oak. Valley Alder woodland dominated by Alder *Alnus glutinosa* occurs alongside many of the streams. Ash/Wych Elm woodland is present on more neutral soils in Holford Glen where Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* form the canopy. Understorey species include Hazel *Corylus avellana*, Field Maple *Acer campestre*, and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. The ground flora is dominated in many of the drier areas by Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis* or by Pendulous Sedge *Carex pendula* on wetter soils. Ramsons *Allium ursinum* is present on flushed slopes.

Scrub has developed on many parts of the hills, especially around the margins of the woodlands. An unusual feature is the way in which Holly is colonising some areas of open ground. Scattered bushes of Hawthorn, Holly, Rowan, Sessile Oak and Downy Birch are frequent on less exposed slopes.

The Quantocks support a rich lichen flora. Many lichen species normally restricted to ancient woodlands occur: Alfoxton Wood is one of only 3 British locations where *Tomasellia lectea* is present. The site also supports a number of flowering plant and fern species that have a local

distribution in Somerset. Cornish Honeywort *Sibthorpia europaea*, Shoreweed *Littorella uniora*, Heath Pearlwort *Sagina subulata*, Deergrass *Trichophorum cespitosum* and Hay-scented Buckler-fern *Dryopteris aemula* are of particular interest. Tunbridge Filmy-fern *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense* and Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* do not occur anywhere else in Somerset. Cowberry occurs here at its southernmost British limit.

The various habitats together with the wide range of slopes and aspects, provide ideal conditions for a rich fauna. Amphibians: Palmate Newt *Triturus helveticus*, Common Frog *Rana temporaria*, and Common Toad *Bufo bufo* are represented in the damper environments. Reptiles present include Adder *Vipera berus*, Grass Snake *Natrix natrix*, Slow Worm *Anguilla fragilis* and Common Lizard *Lacerta vivipara*. 58 species of breeding bird have been recorded: Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Raven *Corvus corax* and Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* being of particular interest. The extensive area of semi-natural habitat provides a valuable hunting ground for a number of raptors. The Quantocks are an important site for Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*. Invertebrates of note include the butterfly, Silver-washed Fritillary *Argynnis paphia*, and 3 nationally rare dead-wood beetles: *Thymalus limbatus*, *Orchesia undulata* and *Rhinosimus ruficollis*.