

File ref:

County: Devon **Site Name:** Dunsdon Farm

District: Torridge

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

Local Planning Authority: Devon County Council, Torridge District Council

National Grid Reference: SS 307083 **Area:** 39.2 (ha) 96.9 (ac)
SS 295078
SS 331075

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 190 **1:10,000** SS 20 NE, SS 30 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): – **Date of Last Revision:** –

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

Other Information:

A new site.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The site represents one of the best examples of traditionally managed, unimproved acidic grassland in Britain. This habitat together with areas of scrub, woodland and tall fen vegetation constitutes a site of great importance for breeding birds and invertebrates and, in particular, for its botanical interest.

The fields concerned are located on the Carboniferous Shales of North Devon. The soils are clayey and acidic and the soil drainage varies from well drained to water-logged. The site is in three parts: one part of the site is on the south facing side and in the bottom of a wide, gently sloping valley, bisected by the now disused Bude Aqueduct, and the other two are to the west of a north-south flowing stream about 0.5 km away.

The grassland sward consists largely of purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* with cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* being a major constituent of the sward in drier areas. The sedges *Carex hostiana*, *C. nigra*, *C. panicea* and *C. pulicaris* are ubiquitous. This sward has, for the most part, been exceptionally well managed in the past thereby allowing a wide variety of herbs associated with this type of grassland to persist in quantity, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, petty whin *Genista anglica*, lesser butterfly-orchid

Dactylorhiza maculata, whorled caraway *Carum verticillatum* and meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum* are abundant.

There are also areas of fen vegetation dominated by meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and rushes *Juncus* sp., but which also contain a great many other species, including marsh cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*, marsh lousewort *Pedicularis palustris*, southern marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and wavy St. John's-wort *Hypericum undulatum*.

Surrounding the fields is a system of Devon banks, ditches and sunken lanes. On top of the banks pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* grows. In the past these trees have been coppiced but this practice ceased some time ago and now twisted and gnarled trees have grown from the coppiced stools and narrow woodland strips have formed. The trees are covered in lichens, including *Usnea articulata* in abundance, whilst the ground flora contains many woodland plants notably wood horsetail *Equisetum sylvaticum*.

Patches of scrub, mainly of sallows *Salix* sp., merge with these woodland strips. These areas support a woodland breeding bird community which includes a heronry with about 20 pairs of grey herons *Ardea cinerea*, and also sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, buzzard *Buteo buteo* and lesser spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*. Grasshopper warblers *Locustella naevia* breed in the ranker grassland. The grassland also provides cover and winter feeding grounds for birds such as curlew *Numenius arquata*, snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and short-eared owl *Asio flammeus*.

This sheltered site is also very rich in invertebrates. Twenty six butterfly species breed here including two nationally restricted species, the wood white *Leptidea sinapis* and the marsh fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia* which are amongst those who rely on herbs in the grassland to provide food for their larvae, as does the narrow bordered bee hawkmoth *Hemaris tityus*.