

COUNTY: DEVON

SITE NAME: PILES COPSE

DISTRICT: SOUTH HAMS (Dartmoor National Park)

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

Local Planning Authority: DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL, Dartmoor National Park Authority

National Grid Reference: SX 646616

Area: 50.0 (ha.) 123.6 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 202

1:10,000: SX 66 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1952

Date of Last Revision: 1976

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1984

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

The site is described in 'A Nature Conservation Review', 1977, Cambridge University Press. It lies within the Dartmoor National Park and within the Devon Structure Plan's Dartmoor Nature Conservation Zone. Extensive prehistoric remains occur including a number of Scheduled A Ancient Monuments.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Piles Copse is one of the few surviving examples of the ancient high-level woodlands of Dartmoor and is representative of oakwoods developed on soils derived from the hard rocks of western and northern Britain.

Piles Copse stands on a steep, west-facing slope within the valley of the River Erme. The site has an altitudinal range of between 240--370m with the majority of the woodland lying between 260--320m. Soils are derived from the underlying granite and the slope is strewn with granite boulders and clitter.

The woodland itself is located in the north-western part of the site mainly on areas of granite clitter. It is dominated by mature Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* of a somewhat stunted and gnarled character, the trees having girth and height dimensions indicative of a low growth rate. The wood is grazed and an understorey is therefore largely absent and natural regeneration of oak unsuccessful. The ground flora is dominated by Creeping Soft-grass *Holcus mollis*, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and contains such herbs as Sheep's Sorrel *Rumex acetosella* and Wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*. In some areas, and especially amongst the granite boulders, the ground vegetation comprises a bryophyte mat, which includes the mosses *Hypnum cupressiforme* var. *filiforme*, *Plagiothecium undulatum* and *Dicranum scoparium*.

The bryophyte community associated with the oakwood is diverse with 43 species recorded. Three species of bryophytes, *Jamesoniella autumnalis*, *Harpanthus scutatus* and *Dicranum flagellare* are not currently known from any other locality in Devon. The trunks and branches of the trees support lichens characteristic of humid but somewhat exposed climatic conditions; the lichen *Parmelia laevigata* being representative. Although now known from other sites in southern and western Britain the lichen *Ochrolechia inversa* was first recorded in England from Piles Copse in 1969.

The woodland also supports a breeding bird community characteristic of western oakwoods. Additional interest is provided by areas of moorland, in which Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* is a common component, and by small areas of valley mire

dominated by Bog Mosses *Sphagnum* spp. and Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*.