

File ref:

**County:** Devon    **Site Name:** Halsdon

**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 555125      **Area:** 56.8 (ha) 140.3 (ac)

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:** 180      **1:10,000:** SS 51 SE

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):** 197      **Date of Last Revision:** –

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

**Other Information:**

Mostly a Devon Trust for Nature Conservation reserve. Boundary amended by extension and deletion.

**Description and Reasons for Notification:**

Halsdon is one of the best sections of an outstanding North Devon river and valley system. The special interest lies in a combination of the river, flood-plain meadows and ancient oak woodlands which support many breeding bird species.

This 1.5 km stretch of the River Torridge varies in width between 10–15 m and runs over a varied bed material consisting of boulders, gravel, sand and silt. The several meadows between the river and the woodland overlie a loamy soil derived from sandstones and shales. Rising steeply from the valley floor to approximately 375 m, the west-facing ridge is of Carboniferous slate with mudstone and siltstone. This provides for a freely drained but mostly very thin soil on which the broad-leaved woodlands are established.

Approximately three-quarters of the site is occupied by woodland, the constituent species of which vary according to soil and drainage conditions. On the thinner, more acid soils sessile oak *Quercus robur* and hybrid oaks dominate and understorey of holly *Ilex aquifolium*, rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* and hazel *Corylus avellana*. Beech *Fagus sylvatica* is locally abundant in the canopy. The ground flora consists mainly of greater woodrush *Luzula sylvatica* with some bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, common cow-wheat *Melampyrum pratense*, broad buckler-fern *Dryopteris dilatata* and hard-fern *Blechnum spicant*.

Areas of more nutrient-rich soil support a greater proportion of ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*. Hazel becomes more abundant, along with downy birch *Betula pubescens*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and spindle *Euonymus europaeus*. Wych elm *Ulmus glabra* occurs in some parts, particularly on the lower slopes. The ground flora is more diverse, with enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*, bugle *Ajuga reptans*, bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* and wood sedge *Carex sylvatica*. Alder *Alnus glutinosa* and willows *Salix* spp. occur in wet hollows at the foot of the ridge where pendulous sedge *C. pendula* forms locally dense patches. There are several small blocks of conifer plantation within the woodland and rhododendron *Rhododendron ponticum* has invaded some areas.

The fields at the foot of the ridge are poorly drained and these marshy areas are dominated by soft rush *Juncus effusus* with occasional meadowsweet *Filipendula*

*ulmaria*, greater bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus*, purple loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria* and wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris*.

In the woodland, all three species of woodpecker are breeding, together with sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, buzzard *Buteo buteo*, wood warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* and pied flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*. Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* and dipper *Cinclus cinclus* nest along this section of the river. Water vole *Arvicola amphibius* occurs and otters *Lutra lutra* are resident on the river. Butterflies recorded include purple hairstreak *Quercusia quercus*, silver-washed fritillary *Argynnis paphia* and speckled wood *Lasiommata aegeria*.