Citation

County: **Somerset/Devon** **Site name:** **South Exmoor**

District: West Somerset, North Devon

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

Local Planning Authority: Exmoor National Park, Somerset County Council, Devon County Council, North Devon District Council

National grid reference: SS 880340
SS 965288
SS 820300
SS 780330
SS 820350 **Area:** 3132.7 (ha) 7742.3 (ac)

Ordnance Survey sheet: 1:50,000 : 180,181

1:10,000 : SS 92 NE, SS 92 NW, SS 82 NE, SS 72 NE, SS 83 SE, SS 83 SW, SS 73 SE, SS 73 SW, SS 83 NW, SS 83 NE, SS 82 NW

Date notified (Under 1949 Act): **Date of last revision:**

Date notified (under 1981 Act): **1992** **Date of last revision:**

Other information: A new site, almost entirely within Exmoor National Park

Description and Reasons for Notification

This site contains extensive areas of heathland including lowland communities which are only found in South West England and South Wales. Transitions between these communities and upland heathland, and semi-natural scrub and woodland, are important because they are not well represented in the South West outside Exmoor. Other important components of the site are acidic and more mesotrophic mires, and wet heath communities found only rarely elsewhere on Exmoor. There is a diverse assemblage of breeding birds typical of mixed heathland and scrub. There is one large colony of the nationally rare Heath Fritillary butterfly (*Mellicta athalia).*

The site includes the five main blocks of heath and moorland vegetation to the southern part of Exmoor: Anstey and Molland Commons, Withypool Common, Winsford Hill, North Molton Ridge and Barcombe Down, and Haddon Hill. The highest point, 435 metres above sea level, is on North Molton Ridge and heath extends down to around 210 metres on West Anstey Common. The whole area is underlain by Ilfracombe Beds, which are slates, siltstones and sandstones of Devonian age.

Upland-type dry heath of the Heather - Bilberry (*Calluna vulgaris - Vaccinium myrtillus*) community forms the main heath of Winsford Hill and of dry slopes, particularly north-facing

slopes, on the other sites. Bilberry and mosses such as *Pleurozium schreberi, Hylocomium splendens* and *Dicranum scoparium* are generally abundant. However, on hill tops and south-facing slopes, they tend to be scarce and are replaced by Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) and Sheep's Fescue (*Festuca ovina*). On a few south-facing slopes this community grades into small patches of the Heather - Bell Heather type, which is rare outside of Scotland and very scarce on Exmoor.

Damper ground supports wet heath. A Heather and Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) dominated version of the Deergrass - Cross-leaved Heath *(Trichophorum cespitosum - Erica tetralix)* wet heath community is extensive. On wetter ground, there is species-rich, hummocky wet heath. There is an abundance of bog mosses (mainly *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *Sphagnum recurvum* and *Sphagnum papillosum)* and Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium osifragum*) is common. On strongly flushed slopes of Winsford Hill there is a variant, rarely found elsewhere on Exmoor, in which Cross-leaved Heath and Common Cottongrass *(Eriophorum angustifolium)* are particularly abundant and Round-leaved Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia)* is present. There are also areas where abundant Cross-leaved Heath and bog moss *(Sphagnum compactum)* occur.

On Brightworthy Barrows, wet heath grades into a Purple Moor-grass - Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta)* dominated mire community. The wet heaths also grade into damp lowland heath of the Western Gorse - Bristle Bent type (*Ulex gallii - Agrostis curtisii)* which is dominated by mixtures of Western Gorse, Bristle Bent, Bell Heather, Purple Moor-grass and Cross-leaved Heath. This community is restricted to South West England. Haddon Hill has good stands of a wetter example with Deergrass, which la rare elsewhere on Exmoor. There are also substantial areas of the Heather - Western Gorse lowland heath type which is almost entirely restricted to Wales and South West England. The community is dominated by mixtures of Heather, Western Gorse and Bell Heather, which often occur as a mosaic with grassy turf of Sheep's Fescue and Common Bent. Gorse (*Ulex europaeus)* is abundant on the moorland edges and extends into this community.

Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum)* is common, although mainly restricted to combes and the steeper hill slopes.

There are species-rich mires and flushes, many of which are rush-dominated examples of the Star Sedge - bog moss (*Carex echinata - Sphagnum recurvum)* community, which include abundant bog mosses and Common Cottongrass, with Bog Asphodel and Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus).* Mires on Haddon Hill have the only Bog Myrtle (*Myrica gale)* on Exmoor moorland.

The River Berle and its tributaries flow through parts of the site and submerged plants such as Alternate Watermilfoil (*Myriophyllum alterniflorum)* are abundant.

There are small areas of semi-natural woodland within the site, including some which are ancient. The most abundant tree species is Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea),* the shrub layer is very sparse and the ground flora includes Bracken, Bilberry and a variety of mosses.

Amongst the vascular plants found on this site are several which are typical of upland habitats but which are uncommon in southern Britain such as Lesser Twayblade *(Listera cordata)* and Stag's-horn Clubmoss (*Lycopodium clavatum*). A nationally scarce plant, Cornish Moneywort (*Sibthorpia europaea)* also occurs, which is almost entirely confined to the extreme west.

The heaths have strong breeding populations of Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra)* and Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata)*. Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) are common near stone boundary walls and other stony places. Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia)* breed in scrub and tall heath. Trees on the moorland edges provide nesting sites for Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*), buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) and Raven (*Corvus corax*). Mires support a few pairs of Snipe *(Gallinago gallinago)*and Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)have nested in the recent past. Dipper *(Cinclus cinclus)* and Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea)* breed on streams.