

File ref:

County: Avon/Somerset

Site Name: **Burrington Combe**

District: Woodspring/Mendip

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

Local Planning Authority: Avon County Council, Somerset County Council, Woodspring District Council, Mendip District Council.

National grid reference: ST 478583

Area: 139.1 (ha) 343.8 (ac)

Ordnance Survey sheet 1:50,000: 182

1:10,000: ST 45 NE

Date notified (Under 1949 Act): 1952

Date of last revision: 1 9 7 2

Date notified (Under 1981 Act): 1 9 8 4

Date of last revision: -

Other information:

Site boundary extended since 1972 Revision.

Statement of interest:

a. **Biological** - The main habitats of interest are associated with the steep sides of the gorge. The sparse calcareous grasslands on thin stony soils have a diverse flora which includes salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, greater and lesser knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*, *C. nigra*, rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, *T. pulegioides*, marjoram *Origanum vulgare* and carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*. Insects are extremely abundant on the warm south-facing slopes despite the paucity of vegetation. On the higher parts the grassland becomes more acidic in character, and supports golden rod *Solidago virgaurea*, wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia* and common bent *Agrostis capillaris*. At the top of the gorge there are narrow bands of limestone heath dominated by western gorse *Ulex gallii*, with bell heather *Erica cinerea* and occasional ling *Calluna vulgaris*. Gradations between limestone grassland and heathland communities produce complex assemblages of species associated with base-rich and base-poor soils. Several interesting species of lichen have been reported from the mossy limestone crags.

The scrub which has established amongst the scree, rock-face and grassland communities on the steep slopes is particularly rich. Calcium-loving species include privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, yew *Taxus baccata*, whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana* and guelder rose *V. opulus*. On the less steep and more acidic western slopes, and on the level ground above the cliffs, the scrub consists largely of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, mountain ash *Sorbus aucuparia*, gorse *Ulex europaeus* and elder *Sambucus nigra*.

At the upper end of the gorge is an immature ash woodland containing a high incidence of the scrub species from which it has developed. The ground flora contains grass plants together with true woodland species such as dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and wood sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*.

Several caves are included within the site, some of which support populations of bats.

b. **Geological** - The site covers the whole of Burrington Combe and also the limestone sections of its three southern tributary valleys. The Combe is a fluvial karst feature comparable in many ways with Cheddar Gorge but showing a close relationship to geological structure. Sinking streams disappear along the limestone shale boundary and a number of caves are intersected by the gorge. In its lower reaches it partly intersects a buried and filled gorge of Triassic age.