

Notification date: 9 January 1987

COUNTY: DERBYSHIRE

SITE NAME: COOMBS DALE

DISTRICT: WEST DERBYSHIRE

SITE REF: 15 WKG

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

Local Planning Authority: PEAK PARK JOINT PLANNING BOARD, West Derbyshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SK 224744

Area: 93.2 (ha.) 230.2 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 119

1:10,000: SK 27 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1954

Date of Last Revision: 1972

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Site boundary alteration (extension & reduction). The site is listed in 'A Nature Conservation Review', edited by D A Ratcliffe, Cambridge University Press 1977.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The Carboniferous Limestone massif of the Peak District is one of the most important in Britain, lying in latitude and altitude between the Mendips and the Craven area of Yorkshire. The limestone is cut by valleys, the 'dales', which expose areas of high geological interest and support a wide range of wildlife habitats; particularly woodland, scrub and grassland.

Those areas of woodland that are regarded as being oldest are dominated by ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and wych elm *Ulmus glabra*. The best examples of this type of woodland in Britain are found in the Peak District and the Mendips. Growing on north and north west facing slopes, these woodlands are late-leafing and cast a light shade in spring, thus supporting a very rich shrub and ground flora which in places is dominated by bryophytes.

Some dales contain a particularly open type of hazel *Corylus avellana* scrub (described as 'retrogressive') which occurs on very poor soils but has an exceptionally rich flora.

A wide range of grassland occurs in the dales, varying according to the soil, aspect, and intensity and type of grazing. The extensive calcareous dale-side grasslands are generally dominated by meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratense* and glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* with a very rich flora.

Other habitats in the dales include rock outcrops and scree and in several dales, a series of stages in scree colonisation by plants can be found.

The great majority of the dales are dry but a few have streams on the surface, some of which are present only in winter. In some areas the streams are fed by lime-rich springs.

Coombs Dale is in an east-west orientation to the south of Stoney Middleton. The vegetation includes a wide range of grasslands which have developed on thin calcareous soils, brown earths and acidic leached soils on both north and south

facing slopes. There are some areas of mixed scrub some of which are developing to a light open woodland.

There are many rare and local plants and invertebrates.

Grazed calcareous grasslands dominated by meadow oat-grass and glaucous sedge occur throughout the Dale. Around rock outcrops and on very shallow soils common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* and wild thyme *Thymus praecox* are particularly abundant with occasional patches of the local spring cinquefoil *Potentilla tabernaemontani*. These open grazed grasslands contain a wide range of species such as crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, quaking grass *Briza media* and the nationally restricted limestone bedstraw *Galium sternerii*.

The ungrazed calcareous grasslands have a high proportion of tall fescue *Festuca arundinacea*. Woolly thistle *Cirsium eriophorum* – a southern species, rare in Derbyshire – occurs locally.

The Dale slopes have more extensive neutral and acidic grasslands than are found in many of the other dales. These have developed on either shallow leached soils or brown earths. They are dominated by sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, and common bent *Agrostis capillaris*. In these grasslands, wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia* is abundant with heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and violets *Viola riviniana* and *V. hirta*. On some of the brown earths, gorse *Ulex europaeus* has developed and there are patches of bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*.

At the upper edges of the Dale there are strongly leached acid soils often mixed with a cherty gravel. These support an acidic grassland of wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* with bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* and heather *Calluna vulgaris*.

The scrub is particularly varied, often becoming a light woodland where ash has developed over screes. Hazel with ash, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* and a variety of other shrubs forms areas of scrub with a diversity of structure. In places this becomes the more open 'retrogressive' scrub with abundant bloody cranesbill *Geranium sanguineum*, lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis* and mountain melick *Melica nutans*. The rare dark-red helleborine *Epipactis atrorubens* occurs in some of these areas. On several screes, the local limestone fern *Gymnocarpium robertianum* is common, and the rare fingered sedge *Carex digitata* occurs in one area.

On spoil heaps of the old lead mines the local spring sandwort *Minuartia vera* is common.

Coombs Dale is one of the few dales that has a colony of dark green fritillary butterfly *Argynnis aglaja*. It also has a good population of the northern brown argus *Aricia artaxerxes (salmacis)* which is here at the southern limits of its range.