

County: Hampshire **Site Name:** Rushmore and Conholt Downs SSSI

Local Planning Authority: Hampshire County Council, Test Valley Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SU 345548

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 185 **1:25,000:** SU 35

Area: 113.2 (ha) 279.7 (ac)

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1979 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1984 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Other Information:

Boundary altered in 1984 to exclude a small area of improved grassland.

Reasons for Notification:

The Site of Special Scientific Interest comprises a series of chalk grassland habitats occupying a system of coombes in a folded chalk plateau. The coombe bottoms and westerly facing slopes support substantial tracts of chalk grassland which comprise a mosaic of shorter, rabbit grazed, species-rich turf, and more rank vegetation dominated by false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* and, locally, by large, discrete patches of rosebay willowherb *Epilobium angustifolium*. Bare chalk rubble occurs on some steeper slopes, evidently derived from intensive rabbit grazing and these, in places, support a comparatively rich flora of bryophytes.

Extensive tracts of chalk scrub occupy the easterly facing coombe sides and the ridge separating the two main coombes. The range of scrub types form a nationally important example of chalk downland seral vegetation and include a juniper *Juniperus communis* stand estimated to be in excess of 100 years old, in which the largest trees exceed 6m in height. This stand is probably the oldest known juniper population on the English chalk. The principal associated woody species are elder *Sambucus nigra*, dogwood *Swida sanguinea*, bramble *Rubus fruticosus* and yew *Taxus baccata*. Elsewhere the scrub is dominated by privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, dogwood, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* or hazel *Corylus avellana*, though the proportions of each of the dominants varies widely, apparently in response to varying depth (or absence) of superficial deposits. Open areas among the scrub support a mix of chalk grassland and woodland plants.

The woodland within the site is mostly ancient and dominated by hazel coppice with oak *Quercus robur* and ash *Fraxinus excelsior* standards which mostly occur at relatively low density. The ground flora is dominated by dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and provides good examples of this stand type on loamy superficial material overlying chalk.

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