

COUNTY: BERKSHIRE

SITE NAME: SEVEN BARROWS

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

Local Planning Authorities: Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU329828

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU38 NW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 3.7 ha 9.1 ac

Other information: The site is a scheduled Ancient Monument and is managed as a nature reserve by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust.

Description and Reasons for Notification

An area of unimproved chalk grassland situated in the Lambourn Downs near the border with Oxfordshire. The site has not been ploughed, due to the presence of the barrows which are the remains of Bronze Age burial chambers. The site supports a rich chalk flora and a diverse butterfly community.

The sward is dominated by tall-growing, coarse grasses, particularly upright brome *Bromus erectus* and tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum*. Although the site is not grazed, parts are mown to encourage the herbs and smaller-growing grasses such as sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* and quaking grass *Briza media*. Also present are glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and the less common spring sedge *C. caryophyllea*.

Apart from grasses and sedges, unimproved chalk grassland contains remarkable numbers of other herbaceous flowering plants. So far over 100 species of herbs have been recorded at Seven Barrows, making it one of the richest grassland sites in the county. Species which are most abundant include greater knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, cowslip *Primula veris* and harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*.

Many of the plants which occur are typical of unimproved and traditionally managed grasslands on chalk and limestone, and are usually absent from improved or disturbed sites. Other characteristic chalk grassland species which are present at Seven Barrows include chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata* and several wild orchids including frog *Coeloglossum viride*, bee *Ophrys apifera* and fragrant orchids *Gymnadenia conopsea*. Saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, an uncommon species in Berkshire, occurs here and the rare field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius* has also been recorded.

Unimproved chalk grasslands are also very rich in insects and other invertebrates. A large number of butterfly species have been recorded at Seven Barrows, including several which are now rapidly declining in Britain due to loss of suitable habitats. Most of these typically occur on chalk grassland where there are suitable food plants for the caterpillars. Species present include small blue which feeds on kidney vetch, brown argus which feeds on common rockrose, and chalkhill blue which feeds solely on horseshoe vetch. Dark green fritillary is also a frequent visitor to the site although its normal food plant, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, has so far not been recorded. Most species also rely on nectar from the profusion of flowers on the site throughout the summer months. A recent colonist at Seven Barrows is the Marsh fritillary, a species more often associated with acidic marshy soils where its food plant, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, is more usually found. Marsh fritillaries are now scarce over most of Britain, having disappeared from the majority of their former haunts since the War, but they are present on several chalk downland sites in Wiltshire and Dorset where devil's-bit scabious survives better in the more oceanic climate. The marsh fritillaries at Seven Barrows can be regarded as an outlier of this south-

western population on chalk.