

Date Notified: 17th January 1992

COUNTY: Norfolk

SITE NAME: OVERSTRAND CLIFFS

DISTRICT: North Norfolk

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

Local Planning Authority: North Norfolk District Council

National Grid Reference: TG 227 419–TG 248 411

Area: 57.43 (ha) 141.91 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 133

1:10,000: TG 24 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1954

Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): –

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Boundary extensions to 1949 site. Boundary includes GCR SIL.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Overstrand Cliffs

This stretch of coast between Cromer and Overstrand on the north-east coast of Norfolk provides the best example of soft cliff habitat in East Anglia. The cliffs are up to 70 metres high and exhibit a wide range of mobility which is reflected in a diverse range of sub-maritime habitats of considerable botanical, entomological and ecological importance. Exposures at the eastern end provide information concerning the glacial history of the area, and the Geological Conservation Review site falls within the boundary of the biological site.

The cliffs consist of unconsolidated Pleistocene sediments which are subject to cliff falls and slumping. This instability has led to the development of a successional series of habitats from bare sand and ruderal communities to semi-stabilised grassland and scrub. Freshwater seepage lines emerging from the cliff-face and stable cliff-top grassland are important elements in the overall diversity of the site, which also supports an outstanding assemblage of invertebrates.

The cliff face which is exposed following falls consists of bare calcareous sand. This is initially colonised by species which are commonly associated with disturbance by man and forms an important example of a natural ruderal community where typically Coltsfoot *Tussilago farfara* is dominant. These slopes are of particular interest for their associated specialised coleopteran fauna with a number of rare species represented including the rove beetle *Bledius filipes* and the ground beetles *Harpalus vernalis* and *Nebria livida*. Fulmars nest on ledges and Sand Martins breed in holes in the cliff face.

On more stable slopes dry grasslands have developed. Those on the rather calcareous sands with some clay are dominated by Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* and Creeping Fescue *Festuca rubra* with a variety of associates including the grasses Yorkshire Fog *Holcus lanatus* and Yellow Oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*; the herbs Ribwort Plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria*, Autumn Hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis*, Black Medick *Medicago lupulina* and Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*. On the sandier soils a community with Cat's Ear *Hypochoeris radicata*, Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria*, Yorkshire Fog *Holcus lanatus*, Creeping Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Early Hair-grass *Aira praecox*, Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* and the moss *Polytrichum piliferum* is developed.

On the stable cliff-top grassland the notable Bulbous Meadow-grass *Poa bulbosa* and the nationally rare parasitic Purple Broomrape *Orobanche purpurea* are present.

The freshwater seepages emerging from the cliff face deposit a heavier clay soil along their flush lines so that base rich flushes have developed. These are dominated in places by Marsh Horsetail *Equisetum palustre*, Jointed Rush *Juncus articulatus* and Sea Club-rush *Scirpus maritimus* with a carpet of bryophytes including *Aneura pinguis* and *Riccardia sinuata*. In two small areas tall fen with Reed *Phragmites australis* and Reedmace *Typha angustifolia* is developed. In the better drained parts of the flushes the red form of Early Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata* var *coccinea* is frequent at its only East Norfolk locality together with Bee Orchids *Ophrys apifera*, Southern Marsh Orchids *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and Common Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. The flushes are of considerable importance for breeding Diptera and in particular several rare or notable species of soldier-flies have been recorded, most notably *Oxycera morrisii*, *Vanoyia tenuicornis* and *Stratiomys potamida*.

On the cliff slopes towards the western end scrub and stunted woodland has developed. This is dominated by Sea Buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides* and Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*, often overgrown with Clematis *Clematis vitalba*. At the base of the cliffs a small dune and narrow strandline add further to the diversity of the site.

The cliff section at Overstrand is one of several between Weybourne and Happisburgh which show a succession of glacial sequences, changing laterally from the three Cromer Tills, through the Contorted Drift to the Marly Drift; and a variety of deformation structures, some probably due direct glacial interference and some due to the weight of the overlying deposits. Important changes in the deposits and their deformation structures occur along the coast. At Overstrand, all three Cromer Tills and intervening beds are present, showing a variety of deformation structures due to both glacially-induced and loading disturbance. The special value of the site lies in the completeness of the succession and the variety and style of the deformations which are not seen elsewhere along the coast.