

**COUNTY:** BERKSHIRE

**SITE NAME:** SNELSMORE COMMON

**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:** SU460710

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:** 174                      **1:10,000:** SU47 SE

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):** 1955                      **Date of Last Revision:** 1975

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1983                      **Date of Last Revision:** 1988

**Area:** 102.8 ha 254.1 ac

**Other information:** Part of the site is managed as a Country Park by Newbury District Council.

### **Description and Reasons for Notification**

The site consists of a variety of woodland and heathland habitats comprising dry heath, wet heath, valley mire (bog), birch woodland and ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland. These support specialised communities of plants and animals, including many species, local or rare in Berkshire. Of particular interest is the valley mire, both botanically and for its well preserved peat remains which have been used in stratigraphic studies of prehistoric changes in vegetation and land-use.

The heathland at Snelsmore Common is of a type once widespread in southern Britain, but now in decline due to loss or deterioration due to development, agricultural improvement or neglect. Large areas of similar heathland are still found in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey and, to a lesser extent, in south-east Berkshire. However in west Berkshire Snelsmore Common comprises the largest and richest area remaining, although there are a number of surviving fragments on other heathland commons elsewhere in the area. Although traditional grazing and other practices have long since ceased, management is presently carried out by hand in order to control invasive bracken, birch and pine, and thereby conserve the open heathland habitat within the site.

Heather *Calluna vulgaris* is the characteristic plant of the common, dominating the well-drained mineral soils which have developed over Plateau Gravel deposits. In the driest areas bell heather *Erica cinerea* also occurs. Cross-leaved heath *E. tetralix* is frequent in wetter, peaty areas, together with abundant or dominant purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea*. Other typical heathland plants include bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, heath milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*, tormentil *Potentilla ejecta*, heath bedstraw *Gallium saxatile* and dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*. Common gorse *E. aeropause*, a widespread and often abundant species on heathland in southern Britain, is uncommon at Snelsmore. Various species of grasses, rushes and sedges also occur, frequently alongside tracks and paths. These include fine-leaved sheep's-fescue *Festuca tenuifolia*, heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, mat-grass *Nardus stricta*, heath rush *Juncus squarrosus*, pill sedge *Carex pilulifera* and green-ribbed sedge *C. binervis*. Lichens which occur on acid soils are better represented at Snelsmore than at other sites in the county. Uncommon species found here include *Cladonia arbuscula*, *C. bacillaris*, *C. uncialis* and *Coelocaulon aculeatum*. These are opportunistic colonies of bare areas amongst the heather. The northern species *Cladonia verticillate* has also been recorded, growing on gravel.

Valley mires have developed in two places on the common, supporting rich communities of vascular plants and bryophytes (mosses and liverworts). The wettest areas are characterised by the abundance of common cotton grass *Eriophorum angustifolium* and the bog-mosses *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. recurvum* and *S. magellanicum*, the last species confined to only two other sites in Berkshire. Bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* and the insectivorous round-leaved sundew *Drosera rotundifolia* are also locally abundant. Other species typically associated with this habitat include heath spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*, meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum*, common lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*, marsh violet *Viola palustris*, bog pimpernel *Anagallis tenella* and bog pondweed *Potamogeton polygonifolius*. Some of these occur

in wet heath bordering the mire, in company with purple moor grass and cross-leaved heath. A number of sedges and allied plants occur

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in the mires, including many-stalked spike-rush *Eleocharis multicaulis*, sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, star sedge

*Carex echinata*, carnation sedge *C. panicea* and white beaked-sedge *Rhynchospora alba*, a very rare species in Berkshire. Liverworts include several species confined to bogs and uncommon or rare in the county. These include *Calypogeia sphagnicola*, *Cephalozia connivens*, *Cladopodiella fluitans*, *Odontoschizma sphagni* and *Riccardia latifrons*.

The main area of bog contains a layer of peat which has accumulated over 5,000 years and has never been cut, providing an unbroken pollen record for this period. Snelsmore Common, being close to the Berkshire Downs, is unique in southern Britain because it is the only location where there is an undisturbed peat profile with a pollen catchment which includes the Chalk. Studies have produced evidence for natural and man-influenced changes in the vegetation of the area since Neolithic times.

The warm conditions afforded by open heathland make this habitat attractive to 'cold blooded' animals such as reptiles and invertebrates. The four commonest British reptiles: adder, grass snake, slow worm and common lizard all occur at Snelsmore, together with the palmate newt which breeds in some small ponds on the common. Insects include heathland moths such as the grey scalloped bar *Disci figure*, heath rustic *Zesty agathina*, and the bog bush-cricket *Metrioptera brachyptera* which is widespread on wet heaths in Berkshire. The purse-web spider *Atypus affinis*, local in southern Britain, has also been recorded.

An area of wet alder woodland on the south side of the common also has a diverse community of bryophytes and lichens, many of which are adapted to the damp and shady conditions. Lichens include a rich community of species growing on trunks of trees such as *Parmelia caperata*, *Pertusaria pertusa* and *Lecanactis abietina*. Bryophytes include the liverwort *Norwellia curvifolia* which is rare in southern England, and the moss *Hookeria lucens* for which this site was the first record of the species in Berkshire. The woodland also contains oak, birch, rowan and holly and supports a varied field layer of woodland plants including hard fern *Blechnum spicant*, remote sedge *Carex remota* and lesser skullcap *Scutellaria minor*, wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and Solomon's seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*.

Mapleash Copse and Withy Copse consist largely of ancient oak woodland with coppiced ash, hazel and field maple. Other trees and shrubs include beech, wild cherry, crab apple, birch, wych elm, honeysuckle, guelder rose and red currant. These copses contain a great diversity of woodland herbs, many of which are particularly suited to the coppice regime. Frequent species include primrose *Primula vulgaris*, wood spurge *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*. In base-rich areas spurge laurel *Daphne-laureola*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea* and woodruff *Gallium odoratum* occur. Other plants strongly associated with ancient woodlands include early dog-violet *Viola reichenbachiana*, Solomon's seal, wood speedwell *Veronica montana*, hairy woodrush *Luzula pilosa*, wood melick *Melica uniflora* and wood sedge *Carex sylvatica*.

The site provides a wide range of habitats suitable for breeding and wintering birds. The woodlands support tawny owl, sparrowhawk, woodcock and hole-nesting species such as great spotted and green woodpeckers, nuthatch, treecreeper, marsh tit and spotted flycatcher. The heathland, scrub and scattered trees of the common are attractive to many birds including willow warbler, garden warbler, tree pipit and yellowhammer. The nightjar, a declining species very much associated with lowland heathland, also occurs here in one of its few Berkshire localities. Areas of mature birch woodland at the edge of the heath support wood warblers, which are rare in the county.