

COUNTY: BERKSHIRE

SITE NAME: CROKER'S HOLE

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: SU324820

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1991 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 4.44 ha 10.97 ac

Other information: Within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Croker's Hole is an area of botanically rich chalk grassland, a habitat which has suffered severe reduction nationally as a result of agricultural intensification, a reduction nowhere more apparent than in west Berkshire. Despite its small size this site is amongst the most floristically diverse of all Berkshire chalk downlands and is additionally noteworthy for the presence of a thriving population of the nationally scarce bastard toadflax *Thesium humifusum*, a species for which Croker's Hole is thought to be the sole remaining Berkshire locality.

Overlying the Middle Chalk the site occupies a dry valley with an east-west orientation. The resulting ecological contrasts between the north and south facing slopes of the valley contribute significantly to the habitat and species diversity of this site.

The site is dominant overall by upright brome *Bromus erectus*, although tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* is locally an important component of the sward. The south facing slopes, overlying thin rendzina soils, support a complex mosaic of short and longer swards, the product of grazing by both rabbits and cattle. In areas of shorter sward, upright brome is occasionally replaced as the dominant grass by sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, the latter growing in association with meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, quaking grass *Briza media*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring-sedge *C. caryophyllea*. Crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* is an occasional component of this sward. Such areas support a great diversity of species characteristic of agriculturally unimproved grassland such as small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, bastard toadflax, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, horseshoe and kidney vetches *Hippocrepis comosa* and *Anthyllis vulneraria*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata* and dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*. Greater knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum*, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, field scabious *Knautia arvensis*, cowslip *Primula veris*, common restharrow *Ononis repens*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* are herb species more typical of areas of longer sward.

The moisture retentive soils of the north-facing slopes of Croker's Hole support a distinctive community type exhibiting certain characteristics more usually associated with neutral meadowland. Thus, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens* are here important components of the sward, while of particular note in this regard is the abundance of green-winged orchid *Orchis morio* and adder's tongue fern *Ophioglossum vulgatum*. The presence of herb species such as common cat's ear *Hypochaeris radicata*, meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor* contributes further to the mesotrophic inflexion of this community.

The structural and species diversity of this downland support an invertebrate fauna of commensurate variety, including several species of butterfly confined to areas of unimproved grassland. Such species include brown argus, small, chalkhill and common blues, large, small and dingy skippers, marbled white and small heath. The presence of the robber fly *Leptarthrus brevis*, a notable species indicative of unimproved calcareous grassland, is of particular interest.

Although not the subject of detailed survey, the vertebrate fauna of this site includes badger, fox, hare, common partridge, skylark, corn bunting and yellowhammer.