

COUNTY: KENT SITE NAME: ALEX FARM PASTURES

DISTRICT:

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

Local Planning Authorities: Kent County Council, Ashford Borough Council

National Grid Reference: TQ 968369 Area: 4.53 (ha.) 11.19 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheets 1:50,000: 189 1:10,000: TQ 93 NE

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1994

Description:

This site consists of two adjoining pastures separated by a small pond and shallow stream. The pastures represent one of the best surviving examples in Kent of unimproved neutral grassland, a nationally rare habitat. The grassland sward contains a range of plant species characteristic of slightly acidic Wealden clay, and supports several scarce butterflies.

Though grazed in the past by either cattle or sheep the pastures have not been grazed by stock for many years. Some of the grassland has been lost to encroachment by bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, although areas of high species diversity are maintained by rabbit grazing.

The pastures are a type of unimproved herb-rich neutral to slightly acidic grassland, characterised by heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* and common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*. The grasses include a variety of species, such as common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, creeping bent *A. stolonifera*, sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, and red fescue *F. rubra*. Features of the sward are the abundance of dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria* and pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus*, and the presence of sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica* and spring sedge *Carex caryophyllea*. Other widespread and frequent species are devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, common knapweed, cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*, adder's-tongue fern *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, and tormentil *Potentilla erecta*. There is a large population of common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. Glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and hedge bedstraw *Galium mollugo* occur where there is base enrichment. The pond adds to the diversity of the site, supporting species such as water violet *Hottonia palustris* and water dropwort *Oenanthe aquatica*.

The pastures also support a number of declining butterfly species, including the nationally scarce¹ pearl-bordered fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* and the only known colony in Kent of the small pearl-bordered fritillary *B. selene*. Other species of interest are grizzled skipper *Pyrgus malvae* and dingy skipper *Erynnis tages*.

¹ Nationally scarce: recorded from between 16 and 100 10km x 10km squares in Britain.