

COUNTY: HEREFORD AND WORCESTER

SITE NAME: THE STURTS

DISTRICT: SOUTH HEREFORD, LEOMINSTER

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

Local Planning Authority: HEREFORD AND WORCESTER COUNTY COUNCIL, South Herefordshire District Council, Leominster District Council

National Grid Reference: SO 336475, SO 338480

Area: 34.02 (ha.) 84.06 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 149

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): –

Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 19 December 1997

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The site lies in the flood plain of the River Wye in the heart of an area known as the Letton Lakes, ten miles north-west of the City of Hereford. The Letton lakes is a low-lying basin and comprises an extensive series of wet grasslands, both unimproved and semi-improved with an associated pattern of drainage ditches, streams and ponds. It is recognised as an area of prime biodiversity importance within the Central Herefordshire natural area. The site consists of two large blocks of grassland and one outlying field and has the largest area of meadow foxtail-greater burnet, *Alopecurus pratensis-Sanguisorba officinalis* grassland type, known in Herefordshire. This vegetation is associated with seasonally flooded lowland river valleys, but is now a nationally scarce, fragmented and threatened habitat of high priority for conservation in England. The size of the site, diversity and mosaic of semi-natural grassland communities contributes further to its importance.

The northern block of fields is currently managed as hay meadow with aftermath grazing and is dominated by meadow foxtail-greater burnet, *Alopecurus pratensis-Sanguisorba officinalis* grassland. The western field is mostly of this type with frequent greater burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*, black knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, agrimony *Agrimonia eupatoria* and birds foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*. The eastern fields are wetter and more diverse due to drainage ditches, waterlogged areas and contrasting, dry ridges. The waterlogged areas support a meadow foxtail-greater burnet *Alopecurus pratensis-Sanguisorba officinalis* community with abundant lesser pond sedge *Carex acutiformis*, meadow sweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and greater burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*. Flag iris *Iris pseudacorus* is frequent in the ditches. The higher ridges support a crested dog's-tail-black knapweed *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* community with frequent devil's bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*.

The southern block of fields are managed both as hay meadow with aftermath grazing and as pasture. These fields flood regularly in the winter when water levels rise in the River Wye. There is a complex mosaic of grassland and wetland communities with the lower ground being waterlogged, interspersed with areas of higher, more freely drained ground. The wettest parts are dominated by meadow sweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, with occasional greater burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*. On naturally, better drained soils, black knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, birds foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, devil's bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus*, agrimony *Agrimonia eupatoria*, betony *Stachys officinalis*, dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria* and common quaking-grass *Briza media* are frequent. Anthills are present in these areas. Locally, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* dominates with occasional articulated rush *Juncus articulatus*.

The outlying field retains a rich flora with a mixture of crested dog's-tail-black knapweed *Cynosurus cristatus*-*Centaurea nigra* grassland and Yorkshire fog-tufted hair-grass *Holcus lanatus*-*Deschampsia cespitosa* grassland.

The fields are drained by a complex network of wet ditches and streams with frequent ponds. In the latter are plants such as skullcap *Scutellaria galericulata*, floating sweet grass *Glyceria fluitans*, reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea*, ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi* and lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*. Most of the ditches and field boundaries are flanked by hedgerows with numerous standard trees and pollarded willows. The diversity and maturity of these hedges contributes significantly to the site's overall wildlife value.

Curlew are recorded in the area and the habitat is suitable for snipe, both of which are uncommon within the county.