

Factsheet

Biodiversity in the North Wessex Downs 1. Chalk Grassland

Chalk Grassland

Chalk grassland is an ecosystem associated with thin basic soil on chalk downland. It is one of the most biologically rich and diverse habitats in the UK with over 40 species of flowering plants recorded from a single square metre of the best quality turf.

Plants are typically short and hardy and include grasses and herbs such as clover.

Just under 9% of the UK's chalk grassland resource lies within the North Wessex Downs AONB.

Sheep on Walbury hill



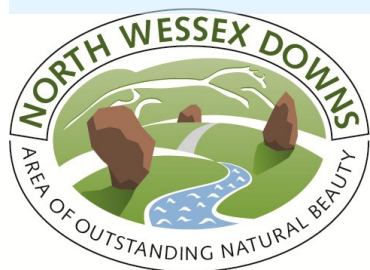
Chalkhill Blue Butterfly

Traditionally grazed by sheep, cattle and rabbits, the AONB's chalk grassland supports important populations of the Early Gentian, a scheduled protected species, and one of Britain's few endemic plants. Plants such as the early gentian, dwarf mouse ear and burnt orchid can be found here.

The grassland also offers food and a breeding ground for declining farmland birds including skylark and stone-curlew. Unimproved chalk grassland is also important for the survival of many scarce invertebrate species such as the Wart-biter Cricket and the internationally threatened Marsh Fritillary Butterfly.

More recent work on the Ridgeway corridor within the AONB (defined as 2.5km to either side of the Ridgeway) suggests that there is a total of 1,545 hectares of chalk grassland within the corridor that has either been notified as an SSSI (653 hectares) or designated as a non-statutory nature conservation site (893 hectares).

For more information see the [North Wessex Downs Chalk Grassland Strategy](#)



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The decline of chalk grassland

Nationally, areas of chalk grassland are a shadow of their extent in the 1900s. Over the past 60 years almost 60% of the UK's unique and fragile chalk grassland has been lost. Due to intensified agricultural practices development and mismanagement. In the North Wessex Downs, there was a 32% decline in the area of chalk grassland between 1968 and 1998. The remaining areas are suffering increasing fragmentation. Today, small isolated blocks of chalk grassland are largely restricted to the steep scarp slopes, dry valleys and areas maintained as pasture around archaeological sites.

Of the 66 SSSIs in the North Wessex Downs, 29 have a chalk grassland component, amounting to 1,421 hectares (0.8% of the area). In addition, 249 Local Wildlife Sites (known also as County Wildlife Sites or Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) have a chalk grassland component. The total area of these sites amounts to 2,163 ha or 1.3% of the area. Unfortunately, the absolute figure for chalk grassland within the local sites is not available. The total area of remaining chalk grassland within the area is not known but it is estimated that the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs Natural Area (which covers roughly two-thirds of the North Wessex Downs) supports at least 1,250 hectares (or 3-5%) of the total English resource of chalk grassland.

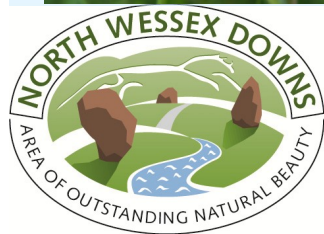
Clover on Beacon Hill



Stone Curlew



Early Gentian –Pewsey by David Hall



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