

**Site name:** Down Farm **County:** Dorset  
**District:** West Dorset  
**Status:** Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)  
**Local Planning Authority:** West Dorset District Council, Dorset County Council  
**Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 sheets:** 194 **National grid reference:** ST501039  
**Notification date:** 7 February 2019 **Area:** 8.09 ha

### Reasons for notification:

Down Farm SSSI is of special interest for its nationally important species-rich lowland meadow grassland and a rich assemblage of grassland fungi.

### General description:

Down Farm is situated on the chalk ridge that extends from the village of Maiden Newton north-west towards Chedington on the Dorset-Somerset border. The site lies to the north of the small market town of Beaminster and at its highest point is 235m. Down Farm sits just below a ridge which is composed of Upper Chalk but on the flatter and gently sloping land superficial deposits of clay-with-flints occur which give rise to both neutral and mixed acid soils. More varied superficial deposits including sand, alluvium and clay head occur and may explain the somewhat unusual vegetation with local and varied soil moisture profiles. The hay meadows at Down Farm are a remnant of previously extensive tracts of unimproved grassland once found across the common grazing land at the nearby Beaminster Down. Mature, flower-rich hedges now surround the meadows.

### Species-rich lowland meadow grassland

The two meadows support an outstanding example of species-rich lowland meadow grassland.

The grassland sward comprises abundant sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and red fescue *Festuca rubra* with locally abundant crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* and common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, along with frequent to occasional meadow fescue *Schedonorus pratensis*, meadow foxtail *Alopecurus pratensis*, downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* and field wood-rush *Luzula campestris*. Quaking-grass *Briza media* and heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens* are occasional, whilst glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring-sedge *Carex caryophyllea* are locally frequent.

The meadows support characteristic herbs found in lowland neutral grasslands: common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* and cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata* are abundant. Other frequent to locally abundant herbs include red clover *Trifolium pratense*, common sorrel *Rumex acetosa*, pignut *Conopodium majus*, oxeye daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* and rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, along with occasional lesser stitchwort *Stellaria graminea*, tufted vetch *Vicia cracca*, meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, bugle *Ajuga reptans*, selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*, yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor* and burnet-saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*. Where soils indicate some seasonal dampness and are more acidic, a small stand of atypical vegetation supports lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*. In addition, the plant communities at the bases of some of the surrounding hedgerows show elements indicative of an ancient woodland ground flora, such as bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*.

A feature in both meadows is a significant population of green-winged orchid *Anacamptis morio* with counts of over 10,000 flowering spikes. Other orchid species are well represented, with smaller numbers of common *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and heath spotted-orchids *Dactylorhiza maculata* and common twayblade *Neottia ovata*.

### Assemblage of grassland fungi

Down Farm supports a nationally important assemblage of grassland fungi. At the time of notification 22 species of waxcaps *Hygrocybe* s.l.<sup>1</sup> species had been recorded with regular counts of 20 species recorded during single visit surveys, which in itself is an exceptional number.

The most abundant waxcap, and our largest species, is the deep-red crimson waxcap *Hygrocybe punicea* which appears here in most years in spectacular numbers during autumn into early winter. Two species listed as 'Vulnerable' on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species have been recorded: citrine waxcap *Hygrocybe citrinovirens*, a lemon-capped, white-gilled species, and dingy waxcap *Neohygrocybe ingrata* (= *Hygrocybe ingrata*). Other waxcaps indicative of important, high quality grassland fungi sites which occur frequently in both meadows include pink waxcap *Porpolomopsis calyptriformis* (= *Hygrocybe calyptriformis*), along with yellow foot waxcap *Cuphophyllus flavipes* (= *Hygrocybe flavipes*), fibrous waxcap *H. intermedia* and splendid waxcap *H. splendidissima*.

The assemblage also includes species from other groups of grassland fungi, including clubs, corals and spindles (Clavariaceae) and pinkgills *Entoloma* s.l. species. At least seven species of Clavariaceae have been recorded; one species, white spindles *Clavaria fragilis* (= *Clavaria fragilis* agg.), is locally frequent along with smaller numbers of fruiting bodies of smoky spindles *Clavaria fumosa*, apricot club *Clavulinopsis luteoalba* and the coral fungus *Ramariopsis subtilis* (= *Clavulinopsis subtilis*). Of particular note is the skinny club *Clavaria incarnata*, a 'Nationally Scarce<sup>2</sup>' species. At least 13 *Entoloma* s.l. species occur at Down Farm, notably the mealy pinkgill *Entoloma prunuloides*, a species characteristic of old grassland fungi sites, and other species infrequently recorded in Dorset such as *E. infula* and *E. mougeotii*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sensu lato*, meaning 'in a broad sense', used here to indicate that the genus includes taxa previously assigned to it.

<sup>2</sup> Nationally Scarce species have been recorded from 16-100 10km x 10km grid squares in Great Britain.