

Site name: The Leasowes **Unitary Authority/County:** Dudley

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

Local Planning Authority: Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 sheets: 139 **National grid reference:** SO979840

Notification date: 7 February 2019 **Area:** 63.60 ha

Reasons for notification:

The Leasowes is of special interest for its nationally important assemblage of grassland fungi and for its species-rich neutral grasslands.

General description:

The SSSI encompasses The Leasowes Country Park, east of Birmingham and within the Black Country urban conurbation. Historically an extensive area of grazed pastures and small arable fields, the site is a relic of the former farmed landscape. It now supports a diverse mosaic of semi-natural habitats, including woodland, wood pasture, scrub and grasslands.

Assemblage of grassland fungi

The Leasowes supports an outstanding diversity and abundance of grassland fungi. The Leasowes is one of a few sites in the West Midlands to contain these rich grassland fungi assemblages and this is largely attributable to the lack of agricultural improvement and low nutrient status of the land, together with regular grazing by livestock and rabbits.

The waxcap *Hygrocybe* s.l.¹ species diversity is exceptional, with 28 species recorded at the time of notification. Species include crimson waxcap *Hygrocybe punicea*, which is strongly indicative of unimproved grassland and is abundant in places, scarlet waxcap *Hygrocybe coccinea*, a robust and sticky red waxcap common in unfertilised pastures, parrot waxcap *Gliophorus psittacinus* (= *Hygrocybe psittacina* agg.) and pink waxcap *Porpolomopsis calyptriformis* (= *Hygrocybe calyptriformis*). In addition, date waxcap *Hygrocybe spadicea*, which has a conspicuous combination of brown cap and orange gills, and citrine waxcap *Hygrocybe citrinovirens*, a lime-yellow species which is listed as 'Vulnerable' on the global IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, have both been recorded on the site. Other waxcaps indicative of important, high quality grassland fungi sites which have been recorded at The Leasowes include yellow foot waxcap *Cuphophyllus flavipes* (= *Hygrocybe flavipes*), fibrous waxcap *Hygrocybe intermedia*, orange waxcap *H. aurantiosplendens* and *H. turunda*, a small orange-yellow waxcap with a distinctive dark-speckled cap.

At least 11 clubs, corals and spindles (clavarioid species) and five earthtongue (geoglossoid) species have been recorded by fruiting body, including the rare and newly described earthtongue species *Microglossum truncatum* (= *Microglossum olivaceum* agg.). Pinkgills *Entoloma* s.l. species add to the diversity of the assemblage.

The highest diversity and abundance of grassland fungi is found in the southern grasslands of the site, however, waxcap species have been recorded in areas across the SSSI, including the golf course.

Species-rich neutral grassland

Small stands of species-rich neutral grassland occur widely in the SSSI, with a notable concentration on the open north-facing slopes in the south of the site, where they form a close

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

mosaic with scattered stands of hawthorn scrub and less rich semi-improved grasslands. The grassland sward varies according to slope, soil and the underlying geology of clay and sandstone layers of the Halesowen beds. Grassland on the steeper slopes and banks is generally most diverse and supports a finer, more open sward.

The grasslands are generally flower-rich with a range of grass species including common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, Yorkshire-fog *Holcus lanatus* and sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, with frequent herbs including common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, greater bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus*, yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, red clover *Trifolium pratense*, common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* and common sorrel *Rumex acetosa*.

Additionally, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, bugle *Ajuga reptans*, hairy sedge *Carex hirta* and mouse-ear hawkweed *Pilosella officinarum* are locally frequent to abundant across the grasslands of the site. Damp areas contain meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* and sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*.

Occasionally present throughout the sward are heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*, jointed rush *Juncus articulatus* and springy turf-moss *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*, indicating a more acidic type of neutral grassland, particularly on the southern slopes.