

COUNTY: SHROPSHIRE

SITE NAME: PREES HEATH

DISTRICT: North Shropshire

SITE REF: 15WV3

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

Local Planning Authority: SHROPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, North Shropshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SJ 558368

Area: 21.68 (ha.) 53.57 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 126

1:10,000: SJ 53 NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): –

Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1991

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

New site. Part of the site is registered as a common under the Commons Registrations Act, 1965.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Prees Heath, located 4 km south of Whitchurch, is a remnant of the formerly extensive lowland heaths of north Shropshire. Situated on well drained acidic soils derived from the underlying glacial sands and gravels, the site supports a variety of heathland communities which are now scarce both in Shropshire and in the West Midlands Region. The site is especially important for its population of the nationally scarce silver-studded blue butterfly *Plebejus argus*.

The silver-studded blue butterfly has two main centres of population in Britain, in southern England and in North Wales. The Prees Heath population is the last surviving Midlands colony of this butterfly which was formerly widespread throughout the Midlands and north west England. This colony is, therefore, of considerable strategic importance with respect to the future conservation of this species in Britain. This colony is also of interest for its individuals which appear physically different from those at other sites, being larger and more brightly coloured. It is likely, therefore, that the Prees Heath colony represents a distinct genetic race of this species of butterfly.

Prees Heath is also of botanical interest as an example of heathland vegetation on extremely dry soils. Both heather *Calluna vulgaris* and bell heather *Erica cinerea* are present, frequently as part of grass heath mosaics with wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* and heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*.

Parts of the site are dominated by acid grassland in which common bent *Agrostis capillaris* and heath-grass are abundant. Typical heathland herbs include tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile*.

An unusual flora has developed along the derelict runways of the old airfield where a combination of calcareous cement and acid sand allows some unlikely associates to grow together. The early stages of heathland regeneration occur in these areas, including many of the food plants, such as heathers and common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, which are important for the silver-studded blue butterfly. These open pioneer communities also favour species such as hare's-foot clover *Trifolium arvense* and sheep's-bit *Jasione montana*. Yellow bartsia *Parentucellia viscosa*, an uncommon southern species, occurs here, in its only known Shropshire locality.

Scrub vegetation, consisting mainly of gorse *Ulex europaeus*, broom *Cytisus scoparius* and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, is scattered throughout these communities, and grades into secondary birch *Betula* spp. woodland along the south western margin of the heath.