

COUNTY: SHROPSHIRE

SITE NAME: MARKED ASH MEADOWS

DISTRICT: South Shropshire

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, South Shropshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SO 513904

Area: 7.36 (ha.) 18.18 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheets 1:50,000: 137

1:10,000: SO 59 SW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 18 August 1998

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

New site. Within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Marked Ash Meadows consists of three traditionally managed herb-rich hay meadows located on the top of the dip slope of Wenlock Edge close to the village of Rushbury in South Shropshire. The meadows lie on gently sloping ground overlying Silurian limestone which gives rise to predominantly neutral soils with both acidic and calcareous influences, the latter being especially evident where the limestone lies near to the surface or outcrops above the silty loam soils.

The meadows are of special interest for a type of herb-rich neutral grassland, characterised by crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* and common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, which is now very scarce in Shropshire and which is nationally restricted and declining. There has been considerable loss of unimproved grassland in South Shropshire and especially on Wenlock Edge where herb-rich grasslands have almost all been destroyed. Marked Ash Meadows is the largest known and most species diverse of the few remaining neutral grasslands in this part of Shropshire.

The meadows contain a wide variety of grasses, the most abundant being crested dog's-tail, sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Yorkshire-fog *Holcus lanatus*, common bent *Agrostis capillaris* and red fescue *Festuca rubra*. A varied herbaceous flora includes species characteristic of traditionally managed hay meadows, such as Oxeye daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*, yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, common knapweed, autumn hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis*, and devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* with, more locally, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum* and cowslip *Primula veris*. Other elements of the flora are variable in abundance reflecting differences in nutrient status and drainage between the three meadows.

The flora of all three meadows predominantly conforms with the heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens* sub-community of the neutral grassland type which reflects the poor nutrient status of the soils. Locally, the meadows have a strongly acidic appearance with species such as heath-grass, tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and hare-bell *Campanula rotundifolia*, forming significant elements of the vegetation.

In the two southernmost meadows the presence of yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*, quaking-grass *Briza media*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum* and meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis* in patches indicates a transition to the meadow vetchling sub-community of the neutral grassland type which is indicative of a mildly calcareous influence.

The presence of a wet area associated with lower lying land at the bottom of the most southerly meadow adds to the overall diversity of the meadow flora. Here the sward is

dominated by meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and includes the locally uncommon marsh hawk's-beard *Crepis paludosa*.

The meadows are separated by a stoned track with wide grassy verges. These verges support a grassland flora which is almost as diverse as the meadows and includes the locally uncommon gromwell *Lithospermum officinale* found here at one of very few known locations in Shropshire.

The meadows support a number of species which are either uncommon or rare in Shropshire, such as adder's-tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, common spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, common twayblade *Listera ovata*, and meadow saffron *Colchicum autumnale*.