

BEACHY HEAD
East Sussex

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Cliffs at Beachy Head, looking east

The downland on top of Beachy Head is excellent for butterflies. From Eastbourne to Seven Sisters Country Park, there are many good places. One is next to the Horseshoe Plantation, north-west of the old Belle Tout lighthouse.

Ownership of over 1200 ha (3,000 acres) of open-access downland between Beachy Head and Birling Gap is shared between Eastbourne Borough Council and the National Trust. It is within the Sussex Downs AONB and will be within the South Downs National Park. There are frequent car parks off the coast road, with a visitor centre at the Eastbourne end. The South Downs Way runs along the cliff top above Beachy Head.

TARGET SPECIES
Silver-spotted and Dingy Skippers, Chalkhill and Adonis Blues, Marbled White, Brown Argus, Dark Green Fritillary, White-letter and Green Hairstreaks, Clouded Yellow.

The famous white cliffs of Beachy Head are part of the Sussex Heritage Coast, which stretches from Eastbourne to Seaford. The official “Heritage Coast” designation means that this is coastline of notable beauty and scientific importance. The cliffs are also within the Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and they will be in the South Downs National Park when this is formed. Large areas of the downland above the cliffs, on both sides of the coast

road, have open-access and they are managed by grazing and hay-making to encourage a rich habitat for wild life, particularly for wild flowers and butterflies.

Look for sheltered, sunny hollows in the downs. A good example is just east of a copse of trees called Horseshoe Plantation, which is about ½ mile from Birling Gap. There is a car park here which is managed by Eastbourne Borough Council. Go through the plantation using the broad, grassy footpath from Birling Gap towards Beachy Head and, once out of the trees, you will find yourself at a very good site. Look on both sides of the footpath as it continues parallel to the road. Also search the sloping hillside to the south and towards the old Belle Tout lighthouse at the edge of the cliff. There are warnings about the danger of getting too near the cliff edge and these are important. It puzzles me that, in this age of health and safety legislation, there is not a fence along the cliff edge. But there is not, so take care here. At the right season (not all at the same time), you should see Marbled White, Silver-spotted and Dingy Skippers, Adonis and Chalkhill Blues, Brown Argus, Common Blue and possibly the occasional Clouded Yellow. White-letter Hairstreak and Speckled Wood have also been found in the Horseshoe Plantation itself.

There is a good circular walk from Birling Gap which takes in the Horseshoe Plantation. Begin by following the South Downs Way eastwards towards Belle Tout lighthouse. This old lighthouse was replaced by the red and white one at the bottom of the cliffs in 1902. For many years it was in danger of falling into the sea. But, in a complex engineering operation in 1999, it was bodily moved back about 15m from the cliff face. It is a listed building which is now in private ownership but I understand that the owners intend to open the lighthouse to the public when building work is completed. As you pass Belle Tout, there are fine views of the coastline, in both directions. Continue for a total distance of about a mile. Here you meet, on your left, a parallel footpath that follows the line of the coast road. Turn back on this other path and walk back, south of Belle Tout, until you reach the Horseshoe Plantation. After prospecting east of the plantation, go on through the woods on the same wide, grassy path, which continues back to Birling Gap. The total round trip is a little over 2 miles of easy walking.

Of course there are many other places to look, on both sides of the coast road. I haven't been there myself, but, according to Butterfly Conservation's Sussex Branch website, one of these is on the other, west, side of Birling Gap. Go west towards Seven Sisters, past the bungalows, to look for a small copse and then a small area of sheltered downland. This is reported to be good for Green Hairstreak, Dark Green Fritillary, Chalkhill Blue, and more. And south-east of Beachy Head, there is a steeply sloping grassy bank which leads to a downland meadow. This is another good place to explore where you should see Chalkhill Blue and Dark Green Fritillary in July. Even late in the season you may still have Clouded yellows to see. In October 2009, after a late flood of immigrants into the UK, observers reported seeing about 40 Clouded Yellows an hour on the downs east of the Horseshoe Plantation.

The chalk base of the South Downs is a remnant of the Wealden Dome. This is thought to have been formed 60 million years ago when the whole area was under the sea. The progressive build-up of shell-like remains of sea creatures formed a thick layer of chalk in the form of a dome. Over millions of years, erosion removed the centre of this dome, but left the South and North Downs and, to the west, the Wessex Weald as we find them today. Centuries of grazing on the thin soil above the chalk allowed downland species of plants and insects to flourish. This lasted until great areas were ploughed and fertilized for arable farming. Then most of the traditional downland disappeared. Fortunately, modern approaches to conservation have reversed that process. Work to return land along the Heritage Coast to grassy downs has been going on since the early 1990s. Nearly 300 acres of arable land on the north side of the coast road have been returned to grazing and are now open to the public.

When the boundaries of the South Downs National Park were first under discussion, there was huge controversy about how big the park should be. There was no argument that it should begin,

in the east, at Beachy Head. The question was, how far should it go. After a spirited debate and a re-opened public inquiry, with Bill Bryson as a leading protagonist for what was finally agreed, it was decided that the Western Weald should also be included. So the South Downs National Park goes on, past the end of the downs proper, all the way to Winchester in the east and Haslemere in the north. Although the Weald is not made up of chalk, but of older sandstones and clays, it was ruled that its rolling landscape of hills and farms, sunken lanes and unspoilt woodland also deserves the environmental protection that national park status ensures.



Cliff-top downland near Beachy Head, looking west, with Horseshoe Plantation on the right



Beachy Head lighthouse



Downland at Beachy Head, looking towards Eastbourne



The Seven Sisters in evening sunlight



Beachy Head from Belle Tout lighthouse



South Downs Path looking west towards Horseshoe Plantation on the right



Downland inland of the cliffs at Belle Tout



Eastern edge of Horseshoe Plantation, with Silver-spotted Skipper territory next to it (right forefront)



Downland butterfly site looking west to Horseshoe Plantation



Entrance to the Horseshoe Plantation car park



View from Horseshoe Plantation looking east



The same site, looking east towards Beachy Head



Walk east from Birling Gap towards the Horseshoe Plantation



The Seven Sisters from Birling Gap



Silver-spotted Skipper at Beachy Head



Silver-spotted Skipper on a path at Beachy Head



Common Blues at Beachy Head



Brown Argus at Beachy Head



National Trust sign near Birling Gap



Common Blue (m) at Beachy Head



Millennium Compass at Beachy Head



Eastbourne Corporation welcome notice

LOCATION

Explorer Map 123: Eastbourne & Beachy Head
 Landranger (pink) Map 199: Eastbourne & Hastings
 Look for the Eastbourne Council's Horseshoe Plantation car park
 at TV562958.

Turn south off the A129 Eastbourne to Seaford road at East Dean. Follow this minor road south to Birling Gap, where there is a National Trust car park, or further round towards Beachy Head to Horseshoe Plantation, where there is an Eastbourne Borough Council car park.

To reach Horseshoe Plantation from the NT car park, there is a walk of about ½ mile along a grassy footpath parallel to the road. One of the good butterfly sites is immediately east of Horseshoe Plantation. Follow the same footpath through the trees to downland on the sheltered eastern side of the plantation. In August, this is a very good site for Silver-spotted Skippers and probably Adonis Blues too, as well as many other downland species.

From the Eastbourne Council's car park, it would be possible to take a wheelchair or a stable mobility scooter through the plantation to view this butterfly site, but it means negotiating a gradient from the car park and I would not recommend doing this without a helper present. There are disabled facilities and refreshments at Beachy Head's Visitor Centre, which is about 2 miles further along the coast road.