

DUNSDON
Devon

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Culm grassland at Dunsdon

Dunsdon is between Holsworthy and Bude, just on the Devon side of the county boundary. It is a National Nature Reserve which is an important site for culm grassland. It is managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust.

The Dunsdon reserve is in two parts, of about equal size, with a combined area of some 75 ha (190 acres). They are both a mixture of woodland and open grassland. The main (western) site, has a large car park and is wheelchair accessible. A 300m boardwalk leads to a viewing platform which looks out over one of the main culm fields.

TARGET SPECIES

Marsh Fritillaries. At present these do not occur in large numbers but strenuous attempts are being made to improve their habitat with promising results. 26 different species have been recorded at Dunsdon, with the Marbled White, Orange Tip, Large White, Green-veined White, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Small Copper and Purple Hairstreak seen regularly.

Culm grassland takes its name from the geological formation which lies below it. This consists of poorly-draining shales, slates and sandstone and includes some layers of soft,

sooty coal for which the old Devon word is culm. Above this underlying rock, there is thin, marshy soil which supports the growth of tussocky purple moor grass interspersed with rushes and with many different wild flowers and mosses. Agriculturally, culm is not of great value, except for grazing cattle, and so vast areas have been drained, levelled, and ploughed, with the inevitable application of artificial fertilizers. The Dunsdon reserve has some of the last remaining fields of undrained culm grassland in the country.

Its management plan is to preserve these old culm fields and to add to them by restoring adjacent fields. That is being done by scraping fertilized top soil away into covered banks and by deep ploughing. Once re-established, the culm grassland must be managed by grazing and by regular burning in the winter months to destroy old rotting grass and eradicate scrub growth. Burning, called swailing, is done in rotation over a period of several years and, surprisingly, does not seem to affect the regrowth of wild flowers within the sward. There seems to be some evidence that grazing may destroy the immature stages of Marsh Fritillaries, so the emphasis in future may be more on regular burning than on grazing, but this remains to be decided.

Running north-south through the western half of the Dunsdon reserve is an arm of the old Bude Canal. This supplied water from the Tamar Lakes (which are to the north) to the main canal which ran from Bude to Holsworthy. It was opened in 1823 with the object of transporting lime-rich sand from Bude. This was spread on agricultural land to improve its fertility. The coming of railways and the introduction of artificial fertilizers led to the canal's closure in 1902. With the help of local authorities, the Bude Canal and Harbour Society is currently restoring those parts of the canal that remain and establishing walks along the old towpaths. The Bude Canal was unusual because it did not have locks. Instead boats had wheels underneath so that they could be dragged up inclines built between different levels. Water power was used to drive underground waterwheels which pulled a loop of chain to which the boats were attached. One of the original tub boats has survived and is now preserved in the Barge Workshop at Helebridge near Bude.

From the viewing platform you can walk south-west across the culm field to a gap in the hedge where there is a bridge over the old canal. The fields on the western side of the canal are where most Marsh Fritillaries will probably be seen. Go at the end of May and in the first part of June if you want to see specimens in good condition because their wings quickly become worn and their brilliant colours are soon lost. Their nickname Greasy Fritillary arose because of the greasy appearance of the underside of their upper wings when scales have been worn off. Marsh Fritillaries respond quickly to sunshine but keep still in the grass when the sun is not out. For photographers, the best plan is to watch where they settle when the sun goes in, when you will have plenty of time to take photos.

There is an interesting walk along the canal's old towpath although you either have to return to the car park by using the local minor roads, or retrace your steps. The damp conditions here are good for dragonflies and damselflies. Broad-bodied chasers, golden-ringed dragonflies, common darters and banded demoiselles may all be about. And in the culm grasses you will see many different plants including the purple flowers of devil's-bit scabious, which is the foodplant of Marsh Fritillary caterpillars, as well as several

different orchids: heath spotted, southern marsh and, if you are lucky, lesser butterfly orchids. Lichen growth is profuse in the damp woods, including bladder-beard lichen, which hangs downwards from branches.

Informative annual reports on Dunsdon NNR are prepared by Devon Wildlife Trust and published on their website. These include data on where Marsh Fritillary caterpillars have been found and the number of sightings of adult butterflies in the preceding year and make interesting reading.



Boardwalk leading 300m from the car park to the viewing platform overlooking culm grassland



Lichen-covered trees alongside the boardwalk



Entrance from the car park



Viewing platform at the end of the boardwalk



Grassland regenerating after winter burning to control scrub growth



Towpath of the old Bude canal



Marsh Fritillary basking



Marsh Fritillary underside



Orange Tip (m)



Large White (f)



Memento by the old Bude canal



Dried up course of the old Bude canal



Main entrance to the western half of the reserve and the car park



Entrance gate to the eastern half of the reserve

LOCATION

Explorer Map 111: Bude, Boscastle and Tintagel
Landranger (pink) Map 190: Bude and Clovelly

The entrance is at SS302080.

The middle of the western and eastern reserves are at SS295078 and SS307083 respectively

Dunsdon NNR is rather hard to find. Take the A3072 from Bude or Holsworthy and look for a turning north to Pancrasweek, which is about 2.5 miles from Holsworthy. Continue through Pancrasweek, turning right at a T-junction to the hamlet of Lana. There is a sharp left-hand bend in Lana, after which the reserve's entrance is about ¼ mile on your left at SS302080. It was not sign-posted when I was there in 2009, and at first sight looks like a farm track with its gate well set back from the road. If you reach another T-junction with a road coming in from your right, you have gone too far. There is a short hard-surfaced track from the entrance to the car park and boardwalk (which are in the western section of the reserve). The eastern section is reached by coming out of the car park, turning left and then immediately right, when it is about another ¼ mile on your left. There is no parking here, so it is best to walk from the car park.