

OLD WINCHESTER HILL
Hampshire

from www.discoverbutterflies.com the website
for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*
© D E Newland 2009



Flower-rich grassland on top of the hill-fort at Old Winchester Hill, looking north

Old Winchester Hill is a well-known beauty spot about 10 miles south-east of Winchester. It is reached by a minor road from Warnford which is on the A32 Alton to Fareham road.

Since 1951, this has been a National Nature Reserve. It is now administered by Natural England. The Old Winchester Hill SSSI covers 65 ha (160 acres), and includes the whole of the NNR. The reserve includes an iron-age hill-fort and other protected archaeological remains which are under the care of English Heritage. The South Downs Path passes through the reserve.

TARGET SPECIES
Chalkhill Blues (in July and August), Marbled Whites (late June/July) and Silver-spotted Skippers (in August) in that order of probable abundance. A total of 30 species are said to have been found here at some time or other.

The rolling South Downs have so far resisted industrialization and their chalky ground provides wonderful habitat for grass-loving butterflies. Old Winchester Hill is on the western end of the South Downs, overlooking the Meon valley. Because it has been grazed for centuries, first by cattle and now by sheep, it is a very good butterfly site. Also it has benefited from the protection afforded in 1951 when it was designated an SSSI and a National Nature Reserve.

There is a lot to see because the site is about one mile wide from east to west and one mile long from north to south, with good footpaths. They pass through large areas of short, grazed turf. Also they run alongside light scrub and pass through established deciduous and evergreen woodland. All are good potential butterfly habitats. At their south end, the footpaths pass close to important ancient monuments in the form of bronze-age burial grounds and an iron-age hill-fort (at grid reference SU641206). These are covered by short, grazed turf and provide a good place to look for butterflies, particularly on calm, sunny days in the summer and early autumn. They are one of the richest botanical sites in southern England. A marker records that the summit is 648 ft (about 200m) above sea level. There are fine views in all directions, reaching as far as Southampton, the Fawley oil refinery and Calshot power station, about 15 miles away.

The grass is mainly sheep's fescue (the sole foodplant for the caterpillars of Silver-spotted Skippers) but includes many other downland grass species. There is probably the largest population of round-headed rampion in the country. This is the purplish-blue county flower of Sussex (although we are in Hampshire). Other flowers that you can expect to find here include horseshoe and kidney vetch, clustered bell-flower, autumn gentian, yellow-wort and small scabious. There are also notable colonies of orchids, including fragrant, pyramidal, bee, man, frog, greater butterfly and common-spotted orchids, and autumn lady's tresses. There is an extensive stand of common juniper, containing several thousand bushes of varying ages. And, to add even more interest, the top-soil consists in some parts of flinty chalk which has allowed heather to become established.

I first visited Old Winchester Hill in early June on a day with only intermittent sunshine. The first butterfly I saw, near the main car park, was a male Green-veined White. Only later, I looked up the species count for the Old Winchester Hill transect. You can see this on the uk butterfly monitoring scheme's website. I was surprised to read that only one Green-veined White had been recorded per transect and then only on 3 visits in the whole of 2008. Although the weather was poor, I saw Meadow Browns, Speckled Woods, Small Heaths, several Painted Ladies (this was in the "good" Painted Lady year of 2009), a Brimstone and a Common Blue. Also later I read that, a few days before, an Adonis Blue had been recorded at the foot of the west-facing slope that leads down from the car park.

The most interesting time to go to Old Winchester Hill would be in August when you should see Silver-spotted Skippers. The 2008 transect recorded 19 in the last week of August. By then Marbled Whites will be tailing off, but there should be plenty of Chalkhill Blues about.

In his book *The Butterflies of Britain & Ireland* (Thomas and Lewington, Dorling Kindersley, 1991), Jeremy Thomas described his studies of how far Silver-studded Skippers fly. They have difficulty colonizing new sites because they are reluctant to cross farmland. He points out that, although conditions at Old Winchester Hill became good for these skippers in about 1960 (9 years after the reserve became an NNR), it took until 1977 for these little fast-flying insects to cross a road and river and two miles of farmland to reach this site. At the time, they were abundant in August at Beacon Hill, which is

another good site on the other side of the Meon River and the A32 road. A visit to both these hills during the peak flight season of mid-August would be very interesting.



Sign on the minor road from Warnford



Natural England's direction signs



Scrub near main car park



Woodland path, looking west



Looking downhill (west) near the main car park



East side of the reserve, looking north-east



Entrance to the hill-fort at the south of the reserve



South Downs Way sign post



Hill-fort from the east



View west from the disabled viewing car park with the fort to the left



Tumuli within the iron-age hill-fort



The flat-topped hill-fort, seen from the east side of the reserve



Natural England welcome sign at the entrance to the disabled car park (requiring a RADAR key for access)



Flower-rich grassland on the hill-fort



Common Spotted-orchids are really common here



Green-veined White (m) near the main car park in early June



Speckled Wood in June



Small Heaths are one of the commonest species at Old Winchester Hill

LOCATION

Explorer Map 132: Winchester, Alresford
and East Meon

Explorer Map 119: Meon Valley, Portsmouth,
Gosport and Fareham

(This is another case where the site lies close
to the edges of two maps)

Landranger (pink) Map 185: Winchester and
Basingstoke

The main car park is off the minor road south
from Warnford, which is on the A32 Alton to
Fareham road at grid reference SU123456. It is
clearly signposted.

Old Winchester Hill is at the western end of the South Downs about 10 miles south-east of the city of Winchester. In addition to the main car park on the road south from Warnford, there is a disabled viewing area where 3 cars may be parked about ¼ mile south of the main car park. A further ¼ mile south is an entrance to a car park for limited-mobility visitors. This allows an easy-access trail to be followed for about 1/3 mile. The easy-access trail has several resting places and viewing points. In order to pass through a locked gate to reach the disabled parking area, a RADAR key is necessary – see <http://www.radar-shop.org.uk/> .