

BEACON HILL
Hampshire

from www.discoverbutterflies.com the website
for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*
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Beacon Hill, looking north-west

Beacon Hill lies at the western end of the South Downs, south-east of Winchester. It is a high chalk spur, overlooking the Meon Valley and Old Winchester Hill (see the separate entry) from the west.

Because of its high-quality species-rich chalk downland, Beacon Hill is a National Nature Reserve. It is therefore managed by Natural England. The reserve covers 40ha (100 acres) which fall within the slightly larger Beacon Hill and Warnford SSSI. The South Downs Way passes through the reserve and the Monarch's Way passes just to the north before swinging south to cross Old Winchester Hill.

TARGET SPECIES
25 species have been reported from Beacon Hill, including Silver-spotted Skipper, Marbled White, Chalkhill Blue, Brown Argus, Dingy Skipper and Green Hairstreak.

Beacon Hill is a National Nature Reserve at the western end of the South Downs. It is a lovely place to visit. On a fine day, there are long-distance panoramic views as far as Portsmouth and Southampton. To the east, it overlooks Old Winchester Hill (see the separate entry), which is about 3 miles away.

The steeply sloping lower slopes of Beacon Hill have been grazed for generations and the hillside is rich with herbs and hardy chalk-loving flowers. Until the middle of the last century, sheep rearing was the principal occupation and where, as here, cultivation and the application of artificial fertilizers has not occurred, downland remains ideal habitat for many butterfly species. Marbled Whites fly in good numbers throughout July, Brown Argus have two broods in May/June and again in August, Chalkhill Blues should be here in numbers towards the end of

July, and Silver-spotted Skippers at the end of August. Also you may well see the occasional Adonis Blue.

My first visit was in August 2009. It was just after I had visited Old Winchester Hill. I had been there earlier in the summer, but now, in August, I hoped to see Silver-spotted Skipper and Adonis Blue at Old Winchester Hill. After two hours searching under intermittent sunshine, I hadn't found either species. I was told that, earlier in the day, two Silver-spotted Skippers had been seen from the path round the top of the hill fort, but no more, and no Adonis Blues.

This visit to Old Winchester Hill had an unexpected bonus though. Although I didn't see the butterflies I had hoped for, I did meet Trevor Antill, the originator of the Monarch's Way walk, and three colleagues. Their long-distance walk follows the route taken by Charles II after the battle of Worcester, when escaping from Cromwell. Trevor and his colleagues were checking the path. The Monarch's Way passes over Old Winchester Hill and just north of Beacon Hill. Since the total walk is 651 miles, it is a serious challenge, but it can be done in parts, and goes through some wonderful butterfly territory.

The day after meeting Trevor, on my otherwise unsuccessful visit to Old Winchester Hill, I decided to go to Beacon Hill. These two reserves are quite close, on opposite sides of the Meon valley, and I knew that there used to be a strong colony of Silver-spotted Skippers at Beacon Hill. Referring to Silver-spotted Skippers on Beacon Hill in the 1960s and 70s, Jeremy Thomas wrote in his book *The Butterflies of Britain and Ireland*, that "more than a thousand adults fly every year". And that is at a time when they had been lost from Old Winchester Hill before it became a protected reserve.

Initially I, and several others, searched at Beacon Hill without success. We saw plenty of Common Blue and Brown Argus but no Silver-spotted Skipper or Adonis Blue. Then two local observers arrived. They visit Beacon Hill regularly, and were confident that some Silver-spotted Skippers, at least, must be here. One of the couple had chosen to have his ashes spread on Beacon Hill and announced that he would change his will if Silver-spotted Skippers could not be found that afternoon.

By now there were only three of us left: the local couple and me. Together we searched for half-an-hour on the sloping, south-eastern slopes. Grasses were typically 25 cm high, too long I wondered for Silver-spotted Skippers. But the confidence of the local observers was justified. Their will did not need to be changed. We found one Silver-spotted Skipper each during half-an-hour's searching (although no Adonis Blues). My conclusion is that, in comparison with reports from previous years, 2009 was not a good year for either species at this western end of the South Downs.

After my visit I looked up the transect data for Beacon Hill on www.ukbms.org/site1005 to find that, over the last few years, there has been a significant decline in the population of Silver-spotted Skippers here. Also Adonis Blues have been seen only occasionally, both here and at Old Winchester Hill where I have been told that they were re-introduced some years ago to the south-facing slope below the tumuli.

During the following few days, I went on to the eastern end of the South Downs, as far as Eastbourne, and visited a number of sites there and on the way (Steyning Downland, Mill Hill, Beachy Head, Friston Gallops, Lullington Heath, and Malling Down). The results were mixed. I saw both species at several places. But Malling Down, near Lewes, was the best, with strong populations of both Silver-spotted Skipper and Adonis Blue. Mill Hill on the edge of Shoreham-by-Sea, was also very good for Adonis Blue. Coincidentally, Shoreham-by-Sea lies at the end of the Monarch's Way walk. It is where Charles II escaped by boat to France.



Trevor Antill and colleagues at the summit of Old Winchester Hill



Old Winchester Hill looking south towards the reintroduction site for Adonis Blues



Grassy woodland walk to Beacon Hill



Natural England's information board



View south-west from the summit of Beacon Hill



South Downs Way signpost at the summit of Beacon Hill



Trig point at the summit of Beacon Hill



View from Beacon Hill towards the Fawley refinery

Flowery slope of Beacon Hill looking west



Old Winchester Hill seen from Beacon Hill



Beacon Hill path looking north-east



View south from the summit of Beacon Hill



Silver-spotted Skipper at Beacon Hill



Brown Argus at Beacon Hill



Shoe pub at Exton, near Beacon Hill



Shoe pub sign at Exton



Old Winchester Hill from Beacon Hill



South face of Beacon Hill looking east towards Old Winchester Hill

LOCATION

Explorer Map 119: Meon Valley, Portsmouth,
Gosport and Fareham
Landranger (pink) Map 185: Winchester and
Basingstoke

The car park is at SU598227 on the minor road north from Meonstoke, which is on the A32 Alton to Fareham road at grid reference SU614205.

Beacon Hill is across the Meon valley from Old Winchester Hill. By car it is reached from the A32 by taking the minor road north from Meonstoke. This passes through the village of Exton to follow the White Way north to Beaconhill Beeches. If in doubt, keep right. The reserve's car park is at the east side of a sharp corner, where the road bears left towards Rooksgrove Farm.

From the car park, there is a short walk of about $\frac{2}{3}$ mile to the top of Beacon Hill. This follows a grassy path along the edge of woodland. At the top there are fine views across to Old Winchester Hill and south and west towards Southampton Water and the Fawley oil refinery.

This site does not have easy access for wheelchairs, but that is available at Old Winchester Hill. There are no facilities at the reserve, but these are available in nearby villages, and there is the Shoe pub at Exton about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the south.