



Castle Hill

National Nature Reserve



working today
for nature tomorrow

Welcome to Castle Hill

National Nature Reserve

This fine example of ancient, traditionally-managed chalk grassland is set within the steeply folded landscape between Lewes and Woodingdean.

Many of the plants and animals that live on the steeper slopes are now very rare. They only survive on remaining fragments of ancient downland like Castle Hill, where they are ideally suited to the short downland turf.

The Council of Europe has designated the site as one of a network of Biogenetic Reserves, and it is protected under both UK and European wildlife laws.

We hope that you enjoy your visit.

Wildlife

From a distance, the most obvious feature at Castle Hill is the close-cropped downland turf on the hill slopes. This is mainly dense, wiry sheep's fescue, but other grasses include upright brome, quaking grass, meadow oat-grass and tor-grass. Traditional grazing over hundreds of years has helped to establish plant communities that are well adapted to the chalky soil, creating a rich habitat with up to 30 plant species in a single square metre.

Looking more closely, you'll find a wide range of colourful flowering plants. Dropwort, salad burnet and several vetches are common in May and June, followed by centaury, yellow-wort and small scabious in late summer. Several unusual plants also grow here, sometimes in considerable



David Harvey / English Nature

In June, the purple flowers of fragrant and common spotted orchids push their heads above the turf. This is also the national stronghold for the much rarer early spider orchid (above), with as many as 50,000 plants being recorded in a single year. Other examples of the orchid family include autumn lady's tresses and pyramidal orchids.

numbers. These include spring gentian and Nottingham catchfly, as well as round-headed rampion, known locally as the Pride of Sussex.

Castle Hill supports a rich variety of insects, including rare butterflies like the chalkhill blue, Adonis blue and marbled whites that depend on the different chalk herbs for their food. Here you'll also find the country's largest colony of wartbiter crickets, which is the focus of a project to re-introduce this rare creature to places where it has become extinct. The work is being funded by English

Nature's Species Recovery Programme. The open areas of downland are home to ground-nesting birds like partridge, skylark and meadow pipit. Birds such as linnet, yellowhammer and whitethroat nest in the gorse at the top of the slopes, as well as in other scattered patches of scrub.

Management

Modern farming techniques have left little room on the Downs for places like Castle Hill, with its rich variety of plants and animals. But here, carefully planned grazing helps to maintain the best possible downland turf, and recently cultivated areas have now been returned to grassland. Although these areas contain few typical downland plants at



Wartbiter cricket / English Nature

present, English Nature will carefully monitor progress as more wild flowers become established over the years.

Chalk grassland is also a victim of neglect. Without regular grazing, invading scrub can quickly smother the herbs and grasses, wiping out the wildlife that depends on them. Some scrub will be kept to provide habitat for nesting birds, as well as cover for small mammals and other creatures. Nevertheless, scrub clearance must be carried out every winter to prevent it encroaching onto the grassland.

You can help to protect this reserve by:

- Leaving flowers for others to enjoy;
- Keeping your dog under proper control, and;
- Fastening gates securely.



Marbled white butterflies on knapweed
Stephen Davis / English Nature

Please do not leave litter, light fires or damage the sensitive grassland.

Access for visitors

Castle Hill lies 1km east of Woodingdean, between Brighton and Lewes. The nearest car park is beside the B2123 at National Grid reference 356063, and the local bus service from Woodingdean to Falmer runs nearby. There are toilets and refreshment facilities in Woodingdean.

A public bridleway crosses the reserve, and

the South Downs Way passes close to the northern boundary; in addition, the Site Manager can arrange for permits to explore more widely. The rough terrain makes access difficult for people with disabilities.

Castle Hill is one of a network of National Nature Reserves established to protect Britain's most important wildlife habitats and geological formations. The best time to visit is between May and July.



English Nature is the government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and natural features throughout England.

For further information, please contact: The Site Manager, English Nature, 33 North Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2PH. Tel: 01273 476595

www.english-nature.org.uk © English Nature 2004

Designed and printed by Cameron Publishing NE11 0HF

Front cover: Castle Hill / M J Emery / English Nature



Awarded for excellence