

Levin Down

A superb example of chalk grassland and scrub, rich in flowers and butterflies

Levin Down is easy to spot. As you come over the ridge at Goodwood racecourse it stands alone as a hill covered in natural scrubby grassland; the olive green hues are so different from the synthetic emerald of the agricultural fields and viridian forestry plantations that form the surrounding landscape. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest; indeed the reason that Levin has so much of its wildlife value still intact is hinted at in the name, which is derived from 'Leave-Along Hill', meaning that the land was too steep for the plough or other intensive agriculture.

Developing scrub is usually a serious problem on many downland sites, but at Levin it has formed an important part of the ecology of the reserve, and is carefully managed to achieve the right balance

Highlights

Many butterflies including duke of burgundy, green and brown hairstreaks, blues. Chalk grassland flowers; chalk heath; juniper; scrub warblers and finches.



duke of burgundy

Abigail Pedlow

between scrub, grassland, and landscape. The bottom edge is ringed with woodland that includes lots of hazel, no doubt one reason why dormice do so well here; they even make forays into the mixed scrub in the middle of the reserve. There are some tall ash trees where brown hairstreak butterflies gather on the topmost leaves, spiralling round in a giddy courtship frenzy, before diving down to the blackthorn to lay their eggs one at a time under the twigs.

The soil on the grassy glades of the lower slopes is richer and being slightly shaded by the intimate mix of bushes, is cooler too. Here the flowers grow that much taller, including the all-important cowslip which provides the perfect foodplant for caterpillars of the rare duke of burgundy butterfly. During May the adults flutter up and down the sunny patches between the bushes looking for a mate. Wild marjoram grows here, the fluffy pink blooms providing nectar for butterflies such as the marbled white, and in late summer the clustered bellflower displays a huddle of violet flowers on top of leafy stems.



Clockwise green hairstreak, wild marjoram, wild thyme

Further up the slopes, the grass becomes shorter, kept that way by the regular attentions of the rabbits and our sheep. The grazing greatly increases the diversity of plant species – fairy flax, wild thyme, salad burnet, carline thistle, milkwort, quaking grass and autumn gentian all squeeze in together to create an incredibly rich sward. Sometimes the effect is punctured by the shocking pink spike of a pyramidal orchid, but it takes a practised eye to pick out the diminutive autumn lady's tresses orchid, just five centimetres high with a spiral of tiny white flowers.

In places it is possible to distinguish the areas that have been cleared of scrub; here the chalk grassland plants are gradually reinstating themselves. Small belts of hawthorn, buckthorn, spindle and other scrubby plants have been left in place providing an intricate network of wind-sheltered glades – perfect for butterflies like the dingy and grizzled skippers and brown argus. This provides good nesting opportunities too and yellowhammers and whitethroats sing from the bush-tops throughout the summer.

On the eastern slope is an area of chalk heath, where plants preferring acid soils such as heather, tormentil and wood sage grow alongside the chalk-lovers. This habitat is caused by wind-blown acid soils mixing with the chalk during the last Ice Age. It is becoming increasingly rare, especially where there has been ploughing and the acidic component has become diluted, but at Levin the purple flowers of ling heather can be seen growing right next to the purple flowers of thyme – something of an ecological anomaly.



Paul Marten

autumn lady's tresses

On the southern slope, above the yew and the whitebeam there are scattered clumps of a downland speciality that is becoming increasingly scarce in England – juniper. This extremely prickly native conifer has suffered in the past by being overcrowded by the yew, which casts a gloomy shade throughout the year. Although the juniper has been released from that particular constraint, rabbits now conspire to prevent any new young plants from becoming established, so new rabbit fencing has been installed to give them a head start.

Spring is an excellent time for a visit when the whitethroats are scratching their songs into the air, the cowslips are shyly revealing their blooms, and butterflies are busying along the glades. However, high summer is the peak of the downland season, when the reward for climbing the hill in the heat of the late morning is the excited buzz of the grasshoppers, the soft breeze from the south, the scent of wild thyme drifting up from the springy turf and a host of butterflies.



Clockwise wasp spider, grizzled skipper, juniper