

Malling Down

Superb chalk grassland and scrub with many typical and rare flowers and butterflies, all within walking distance of Lewes town centre

Stand almost anywhere in Lewes and Malling Down dominates the view to the east, its chalk hills towering up and overlooking the town. It really is worth the challenging climb to the top, if only for the view that takes in the town, the wet meadows surrounding the River Ouse, the South Downs stretching away, or the expanse of the Low Weald farmland.

In summer however, there are a thousand things to command the attention. The grassland is full of flowers. At ground level are the tiny pink-white flowers of squinancywort, and pale purple of wild thyme, as well as the flat leaf-rosettes of many other plants, designed that way to avoid the teeth of grazing animals which are an essential component in the management of chalk grassland. Then there is salad burnet, bird's-foot-trefoil, hairy violet, and round-headed rampion. In June parts of the Coombe are painted yellow with horseshoe vetch, easily visible from Lewes High Street; later they may be pink with centaury or creamy-white with the frothy flower heads of dropwort. Look out too for the shorter deep mauve of autumn gentian.

Highlights

Chalk grassland flowers
Many butterflies such
as adonis, common and
chalkhill blue. Fabulous
views, peace and tranquillity
within minutes of town.



round-headed rampion

Orchids are a speciality of this nature reserve, though numbers of some shallow-rooted species, such as frog and musk orchid have declined over the last 20 years — thought to be a result of some very dry years. Nevertheless, common spotted orchids, always found here on the north-facing slopes, number in the many thousands and one bank in particular is decorated entirely pink with them. There are pyramidal orchids too, and occasional fragrant and bee orchids, as well as common twayblade.

The summer months also belong to the butterflies, and any sunny day will see hundreds of these insects enjoying the nectar of the grassland flowers — wild marjoram (crush the leaves and smell them) and scabious are particular favourites. The rare adonis blue butterfly lives here in very good numbers, and the brilliant blue of the male is a common sight sipping nectar from the flowers of horseshoe vetch, the food plant of their caterpillars. This plant is only part of the story in their extraordinary life-history — they also rely on certain species of ant which take in the developing caterpillar to their nests, and guard the chrysalis until it is transformed into a beautiful adult, all in return for a little sugary fluid and some soothing squeaky noises. In addition,



Paul Marten

bee orchid



Tim Waters

autumn gentian



Clockwise adonis blue, horseshoe vetch, large skipper

the adonis requires the high ground-level temperatures created by very short turf — just one of the reasons why grazing is so important. There are also bright-blue common blues and powder-blue chalkhill blues, as well as many ‘brown’ species (including the black-and-white marbled white!), and many kinds of the small darting skipper butterflies, recently joined by the very rare silver-spotted skipper, now breeding on the reserve.

Large quantities of scrub, such as hawthorn and wayfaring tree attract many birds and provide some nesting space for warblers in particular, such as blackcaps and whitethroats. Magpies and kestrels also use them as look-out points for spotting their prey of large insects and mice. Though this scrub has its uses for the birds, and also supports many insects, it brings with it a high price, for the scrub develops and spreads very rapidly, shading out the grassland flowers and altering the nature of the soil with a regular autumn leaf fall. It has been possible to track the spread of scrub at Malling over the last 100 years or so thanks to some excellent photographic records.

More recently the Trust has been turning the clock back — cutting back much of the scrub and restoring the sheep grazing that has been absent for many years. The Trust has also doubled the size of the reserve, which now includes not only more chalk grassland but a large expanse of land that was previously under arable cultivation. Now we have the opportunity to re-create typical downland vegetation where it has been lost before, and the larger area makes it possible for the Trust to own and manage livestock to ensure the ideal grazing regime.

Malling Down is part of a larger Site of Special Scientific Interest which includes Southerham and Mount Caburn to the south, and has also been designated as candidate Special Area of Conservation — recognised as of international importance. Apart from the orchids, the gentians and the butterflies, it has real value in its convenient location and easy access for anyone to appreciate the beauty of downland as it once was, and the potential to expand good chalk grassland management to surrounding areas.



Mark Monk-Terry

shetland sheep



Damian Waters

kestrel