

Southerham

Picturesque rolling downland with chalk grassland flowers and butterflies, set in a working livestock farm as part of the wider Malling Downs area.

In many ways Southerham Farm is an extension of Malling Down, for it lies right next to it. Donated to the Trust in 2002, it has enabled the Trust to set up and maintain our own livestock operations, with huge ramifications for the efficient management of its other nature reserves. Finding sheep or cattle for essential grazing of the reserves has always been a problem, especially as suitable breeds need to be found and timing is critical. A large barn and storage for farm machinery makes Southerham the perfect base for managing the Trust's own animals. As a result the Trust's sheep flock has grown to around 1000, and cattle to 25, incorporating many rare breeds which are ideal for managing the rough pasture and scrub found on the reserves.



Highlights

Glorious downland scenery with orchids, and other flowers, chalk-loving butterflies including small blue, and farmland birds such as corn bunting.

corn bunting



Clockwise small blue, marbled white, brown argus

Southerham is much more than a working farm however, for it is a fabulous nature reserve in its own right. The flatter areas were farmed with arable crops for many decades, and have now reverted to coarse grassland, which will gradually improve with continued grazing effort. More importantly there are several warm, south-facing slopes, which are alive with butterflies in mid-summer – marbled whites, common blues, brown argus, and the diminutive small blue, which is confusingly brown in colour. This last feeds, as a caterpillar, on the leaves of kidney vetch, and may still be seen as a fully fledged adult butterfly delicately probing the cottony yellow flowers of this plant for nectar.

All the usual chalk grassland flowers are present such as wild marjoram and thyme filling the air with their scent, the brilliant yellow tissue-like common rockrose, midnight-blue round-headed rampion, and ground-hugging dwarf thistle – always there to surprise the unwary when sitting down on the turf. There are some less obvious plants too, such as common broomrape, which has no leaves as it is parasitic on the roots of other plants, and looks a little like a brown orchid. There is the tiny bastard-toadflax, also somewhat parasitic and now a very rare plant of southern chalk grassland, and chalk milkwort,



Clockwise burnt-tip orchid, chalk milkwort, common rockrose

whose brilliant blue flowers are often hidden even among the shorter grasses. The north-facing slopes often sport hundreds of orchids, with fragrant and pyramidal orchids being the commonest, but in the most south-westerly point there are sometimes a few burnt-tip orchids, with scorched-purple flower buds, outliers from the famous colony at nearby Mount Caburn. One or two areas are more meadow-like, filled with red clover which is so vital for declining numbers of bumble bees, and which in some years hold thousands of butter-yellow cowslips.

Birds are also an important part of the wildlife interest here, and reflect this sites farming heritage. Little owls can sometimes be seen during the day sitting on a fence-post, looking out for large insects such as rose chafers or bush-crickets, and corn buntings sit at the top of hawthorn bushes, reeling out their jangly song which sounds like a bunch of keys being shaken vigorously. The tall grasslands are dense with skylarks which build their nests there, and linnets tour the whole area in small, noisy flocks. In the late afternoon many of these birds come to the old dew pond in the centre of the reserve, to drink at one of the few sources of fresh water available. The reserve is also visited from time to time by buzzards, ravens and peregrine falcons.



Close to the dewpond is an ancient earthwork, which lies next to a natural valley called Bible Bottom. When the sun is low the form of the earthwork can be seen as a large rectangle bisected by a straight line, giving the appearance of a huge book.

Southerham Farm provides a physical link between Malling Down and Mount Caburn, and means that almost the whole of this internationally important site for wildlife is now under direct conservation management. Southerham is separated from Malling Down only by a small golf course, but it is very different in character. Rather than an intimate patchwork of scrub and small valleys Southerham has an altogether more generous landscape of big, rolling hills, only sparsely dotted with a few trees and bushes. It is ideal walking country, and a perfect example of what we all know and love about the South Downs.



top buzzard bottom view of the valley