

**The Hills Group and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust  
Landfill Communities Fund  
2015/16 Report**



*Common Spotted Orchid – Clattinger Farm Nature Reserve 2015*



# Introduction

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The financial support provided by The Hills Group through the Landfill Communities Fund is vital in protecting biodiversity and enhancing public access and enjoyment to some of the most precious of Britain's wildlife sites. The unique relationship between The Hills Group and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust has resulted in the protection, maintenance and enhancement of Wiltshire's natural environment for the benefit of wildlife and people. This brief report illustrates some of the work made possible by the generous support by The Hills Group during 2015/16. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is very grateful for the support and encouragement provided by The Hills Group and the enduring legacy that this is providing for the people of Wiltshire and beyond.

Dr Gary Mantle MBE  
Chief Executive  
26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016



# Lowland Neutral Meadows

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Landfill Tax amount allocated: £143,545

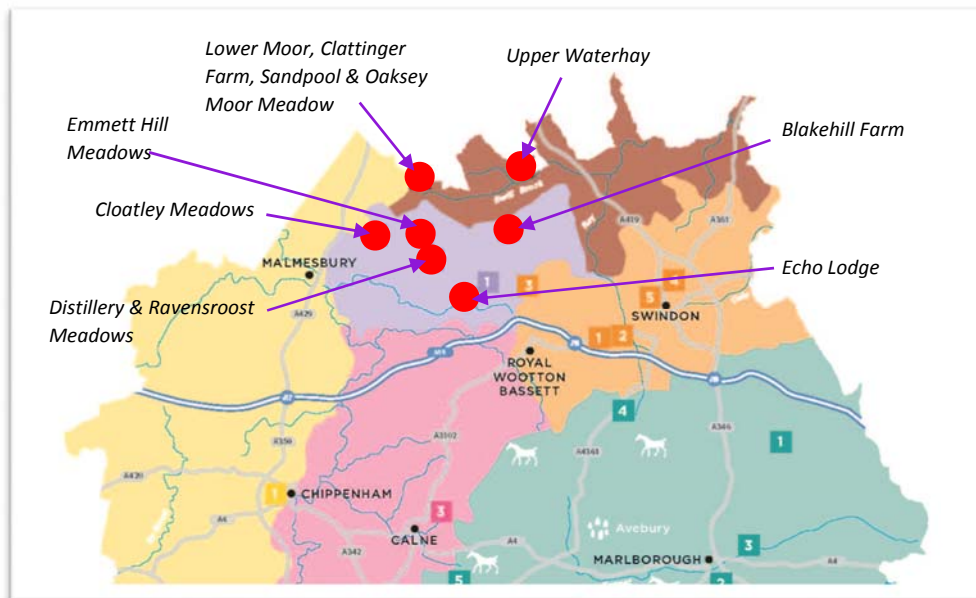
Over the past 60 years the traditional hay meadows of lowland England have disappeared fast, with just 2-3% remaining. These meadows are a beautiful reminder of a time when our countryside was full of wildlife and it was normal to hear the song of the skylark (declined by 75% since the late 1970s) and fields were awash with colourful wildflowers buzzing with the sound of countless insects and graced with clouds of butterflies.



Fortunately Wiltshire remains a stronghold for the remaining meadows and thanks to the continuing support of The Hills Group through the Landfill Communities Fund, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust has been able to protect maintain and enhance these precious jewels.

During the past year a wide range of activities and capital works have been undertaken at a number of WWT Nature Reserves.





## Enhancements

**Capital Works** - An extensive programme of stock fencing (2.3km) has been carried out at Blakehill and Lower Moor Farms, Emmett Hill and Cloatley Meadows. This will ensure that the required conservation grazing can be carried out securely by the Trust's herd of cattle and sheep. New vehicle gates and mobility kissing gates have been installed at Blakehill Farm to provide easier access to reserves by both Trust vehicles and the general public. Also at Blakehill numerous refugia for invertebrates and reptiles have been created. The success of these will be assessed next summer.



*Hibernacula & reptile refugia mound at Blakehill Farm*

A large new pond has been created at Blakehill. Even before any vegetation has established this area has attracted a range of wildlife and up to 15 snipe have been seen feeding on the pond margins. The pond will complement the existing ponds in this part of the reserve and will encourage the spread of the various species of dragonfly recorded here.



**Use of livestock** - To keep the grass sward open, allow wildflowers to develop and insects to flourish it is necessary to graze these neutral meadow sites with low numbers of cattle and sheep to achieve the precise grazing pressure. Regular monitoring helps to ensure that we avoid problems caused by under grazing, which results in too thick or long a grass sward and limited wildflowers or over grazing, which leads to poaching of the ground, soil erosion and potential colonisation by undesirable species such as ragwort, thistles and docks.

The establishment of a new management structure for the Trust's farming operation continued. The financial support from the Hills Group under the Landfill Communities Fund was crucial in allowing the transition to a more robust system.

Early in the year the Trust adjusted the way in which Blakehill is farmed with fewer cattle being overwintered on the site resulting in more extensive grazing than in previous years. This has improved the habitat for birds using the site such as Short-eared owls and curlews (see below).

Bovine tb in our cattle has proved to be problematic and we continue to try different measures to limit spread of the disease. For example, we are looking at the possible management of Cloatley Meadows just using sheep. This will require special agreement from Natural England. Eighty Suffolk and mule sheep were purchased for grazing the northern neutral meadows. A trough was installed in Poacher's Field, at Blakehill Farm which will enable the grazing of this parcel of land in isolation.

## Community Engagement

**Volunteering** - The Blakehill volunteer group continues to meet on a monthly basis and tasks undertaken during the year have included harvesting of meadow seeds and hedgerow management. The volunteers conducted their annual checks of the barn owl box in November, with evidence of roosting, but not breeding, discovered. New boxes have been constructed and will be sited on trees in other parts of the site before next breeding season.

Volunteers at Emmett Hill during autumn and winter 2015/2016 cut and removed bramble from the margins of Long Meadows; coppiced scrub from the old enclosure in Pignut Meadow; and started to hand-pull bulrush from the pond.

**Events** - A three-day tree planting event for Nationwide was held at Ravensroost Meadow in late November, with over 100 employees and families attending and more than 1500 trees planted. Another event has been arranged for early March 2016, during which a willow bed, composed of several varieties of willow, will be planted.

**Nature Highlights during the year** - At Blakehill Farm, Tree pipit, black redstart, grasshopper warbler and woodchat shrike were all recorded for the first time during 2015, and there were also record numbers of whinchat and whimbrel.



*Whimbrel feeding at Blakehill Farm*

The regular sighting of Short-eared owls has led to record numbers of bird watchers visiting Blakehill at dusk. Other raptors seen include, peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Buzzard, Red Kite, Hobby and Kestrel. The site now regularly features on the Wiltshire Ornithological Society's 'Recent Sightings' website.



*Short eared owls fighting in the sky above Blakehill.*

It was particularly exciting to see two pairs of curlews in early summer on the damper fields at Blakehill. Curlew have rapidly declined across Europe and halting this is one of our biggest conservation challenges. While our hopes for successful breeding by these birds was probably not realised, we are encouraged by their presence and are looking for further ways to encourage breeding success.





*Curlew – halting its decline is one of conservation's biggest challenges.*

And at Ravensroost Meadow Swallow, house martin, reed bunting and meadow pipit were some of the highlights. During the November tree planting event, jack snipe were observed at the pond area, a new species record for the reserve.

**Monitoring** – Landfill Communities Fund monies from the Hills Group has enabled the Trust to undertake a number of meadow restoration projects. The largest lowland neutral meadow restoration in Britain is being undertaken by the Trust at Blakehill Farm. The most comprehensive survey yet of the flora of the central plateau area was undertaken this year. We were delighted to see that the condition of the sward was considered to be “good”, with few weed species and little encroaching scrub. Work will continue to increase the frequency of meadow wildflowers across the plateau, to improve the patchy distribution. The large area of pyramidal orchids on the central plateau was especially pleasing to see.



# Jones's Mill Nature Reserve, Pewsey

Landfill Tax amount allocated: £10,000

The best known example of a lowland calcareous mire, Jones's Mill is protected as a European Special Area of Conservation and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The reserve is popular with the local community and home to rare and endangered species.



## Enhancements

**Capital Works** - New boardwalk have been installed throughout the inner circular path, helping people avoid the worst of the muddy areas. From a conservation perspective, the most significant capital works have been the preparation and seeding of the Big Forty fields with wild flowers using 'green hay' from Clattinger Farm. The Yellow Rattle introduced to the Big Forty parasitizes the grasses. This reduces the grass growth and allows wild flowers to better establish. The reseeding took place after the Big Forty had been cut and baled.

**Use of livestock** – In addition to the normal grazing of the fenland by the hardy Belted Galloway cattle, our grazing contractor, John Ponzo has run his cattle over the Big Forty to knock back the grass. The mild weather led to an abundance of grass. Cattle were kept on the fields for as long as possible to keep the grass in check, keep the sward open and allow the flowers to establish. They have now been removed to avoid poaching and will return next spring to keep the sward open.

**Maintenance** – Maintenance has predominantly focussed on tree felling and coppicing. Some of this material was then used to build an otter holt to replace a similar structure that had rotted away.



**Monitoring** - Dr. M. J. Willing undertook a survey of the fen searching for the rare and protected Desmoulin whorl snail. This was part of a larger survey throughout the River Avon SAC. The report noted:

*"The surveys confirmed the presence of the snail at five sites. Two of these (Porton Meadows & Jones's Mill) were judged to have Favourable Conservation Status for the snail, but population declines were recorded at three others (Sopley Island, Hurdcott and West Amesbury/Normanton) which were judged to have Unfavourable Conservation Status."*



## Lower Moor Farm Complex (including Clattinger Farm, Sandpool & Oaksey Moor Meadow)

Landfill Tax amount allocated: £16,166

Lower Moor Farm and its visitor centre is the gateway to Clattinger Farm, Sandpool and Oaksey Moor Meadow. The fields of Clattinger Farm are the finest example of traditional hay meadows to be found in Britain. The short winter turf is transformed during the summer months into a riot of colour and the air is filled with the sounds of insects and songbirds. The care of this unique place with its diverse mix of pastures, hay meadows, lakes, ancient trees and hedgerows remains one of the highest priorities of the Trust.



## Enhancements

**Maintenance** - There has been a programme of routine maintenance at the reserve, including path clearance; repair of fencing, gates and boardwalks; removal of hazardous trees; and maintenance of the hides. New fencing has been installed at Long Meadow and Three Acre Piece, and these fields can now be grazed as individual units. The raised beds at the visitor centre were planted with vegetables and herbs.

Clattinger Farm and Oaksey Moor Meadow continue to be used to supply green hay for use at a number of receptor sites such as the Chelworth solar array and Highgrove House. Seed from Clattinger Farm has also been harvested and used for restoration at Tadpole Farm and also sold to private individuals.

**Use of livestock** - There has been extensive grazing throughout the majority of the year by the Trust's herds of Belted Galloway cattle and Herdwick sheep. The Roundhouse on Sandpool and the Dutch Barns on Clattinger continue to be used to house cattle during winter months and prolonged wet periods as well as during bTB testing. The revised grazing arrangements for Swill brook Meadow (part of Lower Moor Farm) continues to result in the spread of wildflowers including snakes head fritillaries. Monitoring by academics from the Open University showed that this year the plant community had changed from improved pasture to having greater similarity to the SSSI fields of Clattinger Farm – a remarkable achievement and a clear demonstration of what can be achieved by precision grazing and halting the input of fertilizers.

## Community Engagement

**Volunteering** - The monthly volunteer group has gone from strength to strength, and now regularly attracts over 12 people. This year volunteers have been involved in a number of tasks, including fruit picking and orchard management, cutting basking areas for reptiles, clearing scrub in front of the hides, and pulling willow from the education area ponds. A corporate volunteer group constructed a ragwort store at Sandpool in August and Cirencester College visited in early December to cut and remove encroaching scrub from Ditch Field and Washpool Ground at Clattinger as part of their work experience module.

**Events** - Lower Moor Farm continues to be used for schools visits (15 visits in 2015) with minibeast hunting being a particular favourite. This is possibly due to the presence of Great Crested Newts in the education area pond. The Trust hosted a visit from UK Flood Meadows Partnership, students from Reading University and HRH's garden staff from Highgrove House.

**Nature Highlights during the year** - Daily sightings of a family of otters have helped to increase visitor numbers for Lower Moor Farm with a higher than normal number of photographers visiting.





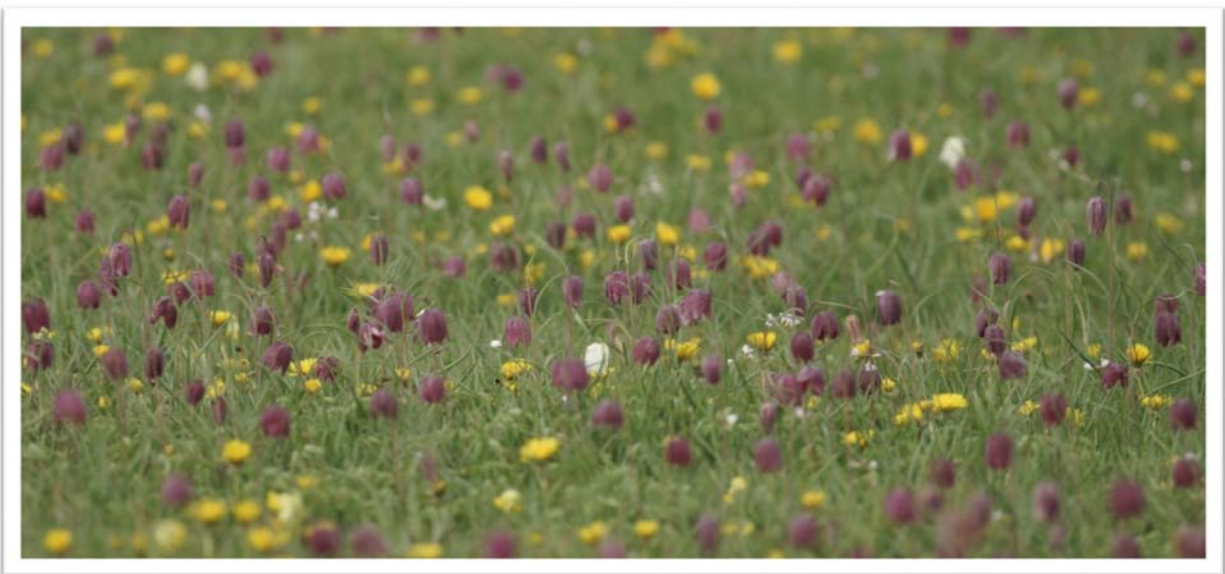
Other sightings include kingfisher (including a juvenile), the first recorded Cetti's warbler and good numbers of garden warblers and blackcaps and even a Bittern. Abundant field signs of a beaver have been noted on Swallow Pool and at least six grey heron nests have been established on the reserve this season.



Good numbers of grass snakes, common lizards and slow worms were recorded under reptile felts within the education area at Lower Moor Farm and at Sandpool. Common lizards, including juveniles, have also made their home in the heronry hide.

An Osprey was observed over Mallard Lake by the fly-fishermen – and having greater success in catching trout than they were!

The wildflowers at Clattinger Farm provided their usual spectacular display. There were in excess of 50,000 Snakes head fritillaries flowering in Bridge Field followed by 20,000 Green-winged Orchids and Southern Marsh Orchids in the adjacent Front Field. Until hay cut, Clattinger Farm was utterly inspiring with an abundance of flowers unlike anywhere else.



*Snakes head fritillaries in bloom at Clattinger Farm*



# Langford Lakes

Landfill Tax amount allocated: £12,360

Lying along the Wylfe valley in the chalk landscapes of South Wiltshire, Langford Lakes provides crucial wetland habitat. Over 140 species of birds have been recorded at this site including numerous rare or endangered species. The reserve includes 1 kilometre of the River Wylfe with its spawning salmon and healthy populations of wild brown trout and grayling.



## Enhancements

**Capital Works** - The new disabled toilet block and fire escape at Lakeside Centre has been warmly welcome by all users of the site. This was funded entirely through the Landfill Communities Fund by The Hills Group. This was officially opened by Alan Pardoe on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2015 as part of the Wild Connections public event.



Trust staff have created a new circular path around Long Pond and the corner of Great Meadow. Works have included the installation of screening, gates and a bridge. This allows visitors to now take a circular walk around the reserve and enjoy a variety of different habitats and vistas.

**Use of livestock** – Sheep were used to graze East Clyffe Meadow and Lapwing Meadow that previously been green-hayed to help encourage the spread of wildflowers across the area.

## Community Engagement

**Volunteering** – The Langford volunteer group continues to meet on a regular basis and have been busy over the year clearing vegetation around paths and hides and carrying out other general maintenance. They planting 600 trees along the river in Great Meadow as part of catchment wide efforts to reduce the warming of the river by creating more shade. Studies have revealed that reduced river flows and warmer weather (both perhaps a consequence of a changing climate) have resulted in an increase in water temperatures. This in turn is impacting upon salmon migration up the river to spawn. They have also transplanted reed turves from the edge of Brockbank Lake to the Great Meadow reed bed.

**Events** - Langford Lakes remains a popular destination for Wiltshire's schools with 30 sessions taking place between April and July. Workshops range from hunting for minibeasts and creating wild art to measuring river flows as part of A River's Tale.

The Wild Connections project (part funded by The Hills Group through the Landfill Communities Fund) have run events on site on a regular basis. These were very well supported, and engaged people in activities such as slacklining, hurdle making, stream dipping, and watching a puppet show about wetland wildlife.

**Nature Highlights during the year** - A pair of little ringed plover was identified as potentially breeding on the new Great Meadow wetland. Little ringed plovers breed in open gravel areas with little plant growth next to freshwater and would have been attracted to the bare gravel and muddy edges of East Clyffe Pond. This caused great excitement amongst the birdwatching community and saw an increase in visitor numbers. The site regularly features on the Wiltshire website for recent bird sightings.



*A pair of Little Ringed Plovers at Langford Lakes*

# Woodland Habitat Improvement

Landfill Tax amount allocated: £8,334

Wiltshire is renowned for its grasslands but nearly 10% of the county is woodland and is home to an outstanding range of woodland butterflies such as purple emperor, silver washed fritillary and white admiral. The funding from The Hills Group supports the Trust's woodland nature reserves which require regular management and maintenance of access as well as tree safety work.





## Enhancements

**Capital Works** - A low level path was constructed at King's Farm Wood in September 2015 which connects the reserve entrance at Badger's Brook to Diocese Meadows. This has been welcomed by local residents who use the site for walking their dogs as this area has been particularly treacherous during wet weather. (The Trust took a 15 year lease on Diocese Meadow in 2014 thanks to funding by The Hills Group through the Landfill Communities Fund). In addition to this, 100m of boardwalk has also been installed at the top of the site between King's Farm Wood and Markham Banks, another area that was particularly muddy in wet weather.

**Maintenance** – Maintenance has predominantly focussed on path cutting, scrub clearance and fencing repairs. Strong winds brought down a number of trees, which were cleared by the Trust's estates team. At The Firs, several hazardous trees have had to be removed along the perimeter path and encroaching brambles removed. Consent has been obtained from the Forestry Commission to create a glade within dense canopy woodland in the west of The Firs and carry out thinning in coupes along the central ride. Trees have been marked up prior to felling.

## Community Engagement

**Volunteering** - Volunteers have carried out coppicing and thinning in both woodlands. The Estates Team has carried out ride-side strimming. At Green Lane Wood the Scouts have continued to assist by cutting small scallops in to the east-west rides. Volunteers meet on a monthly basis and undertake most of the general site maintenance. Over the past year the volunteer group at Oyster's Coppice have carried out a variety of small-scale infrastructure related tasks including bridge repair, step repair, path works and ditching.

The dedicated Blackmoor Copse Volunteer Group has carried out a variety of tasks throughout the year including autumn swiping and raking of bracken in the ride-side glades to benefit the rare pearl-bordered fritillary butterflies and cutting back long vegetation from the smaller paths.

The Devenish Local Supporters Group carries out much of the practical habitat management work required. Over the past year the group has cut back road-side hedges and maintained the car park, repaired woven hazel deer enclosures, planted 20 oak and hazel whips in small clumps along the north/south ride edges, hand-pulled and dug out ash seedlings and saplings from the species-rich chalk grassland, and carried out ride and glade management.

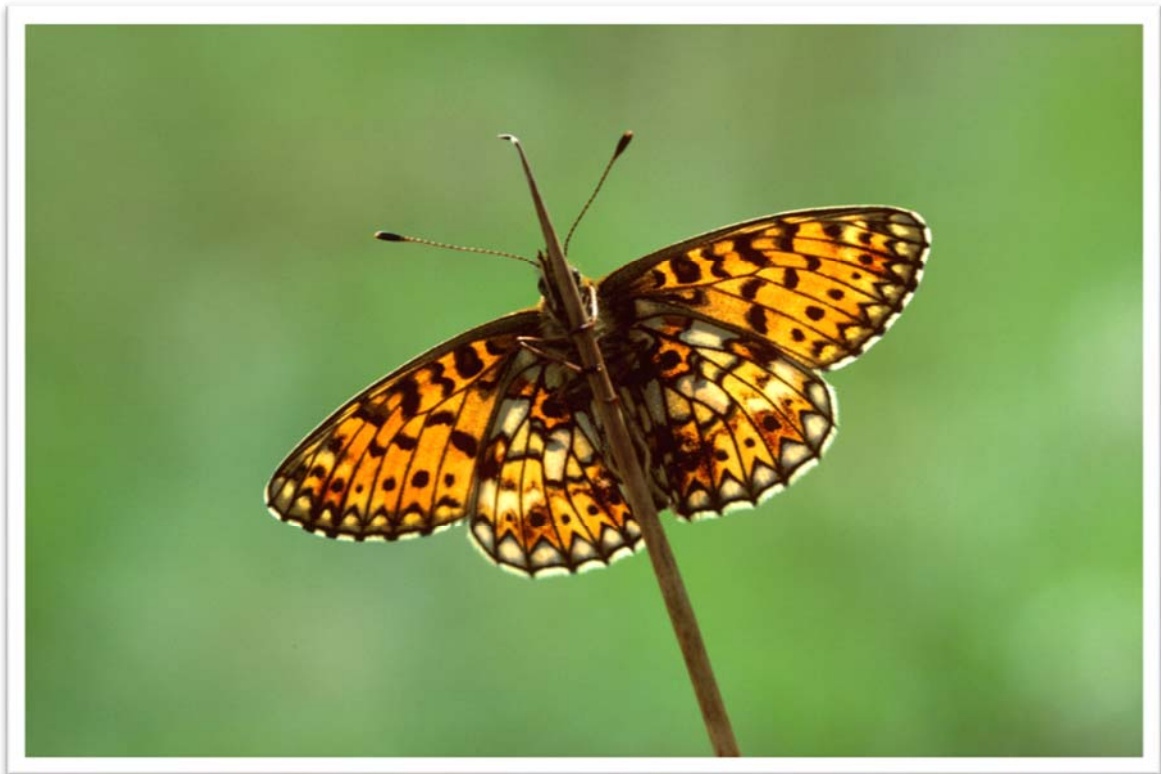
During the winter, Wiltshire Wildlife Conservation Volunteers have continued the rotational coppice of compartments in the north-eastern corner of Clouts Wood. Instead of deer fencing, cut material is being stacked on hazel stools to minimise deer browsing of the regrowth.

**Events** - In February two new Toad Crossing signs were installed on Smallbrook Road, Warminster to warn drivers of migrating toads returning to breed in their natal ponds on the reserve. Awareness of the annual toad migration was raised via the Wiltshire Times, Warminster Journal and Wiltshire Life.

**Monitoring** - Dormouse monitoring was carried out at Oysters Coppice during May-November. We were pleased that a dormouse nest was found as well as wood mice and shrews being recorded.

A number of Trust nature reserves are now registered with the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme and transects have been walked on a weekly basis during April- September. This year a good number of the woodland butterflies - purple emperors, pearl-bordered and small pearl-bordered fritillaries - were recorded at Blackmoor Copse.

Bird ringing has continued within at The Firs and a number of new marsh tits have been caught and ringed this year.



*Small pearl bordered fritillary*

At a light trapping for moths event in May, 87 species were identified including Devon carpet (*Lampropteryx otregiata*) a Nationally Scarce (B) species. A volunteer has been moth trapping at The Devenish reserve over the summer, with 25 species recorded in July including dark spectacle moth (*Abrostola triplasia*).

Ravensroost Wood has seen an increase in sightings of Essex skipper, white-letter hairstreak, purple hairstreak and marbled white but it has, however, also seen a decrease in numbers of white admiral, common blue and silver-washed fritillary butterflies.



*White admiral butterfly*

**Other nature highlights during the year** - In June a longhorn beetle *Poecilium alni* was recorded at Biss Wood; it's first known Wiltshire site.

In May, a Minotaur Beetle (*Typhaeus typhoeus*) was recorded for the first time at Blackmoor Copse. In Wiltshire it is a resident species, which occurs very locally. Prior to this it had only been recorded seven times spread across four locations in the county and this was the first record received by the Biological Records Centre since 1999.

## Lowland Calcareous Grasslands

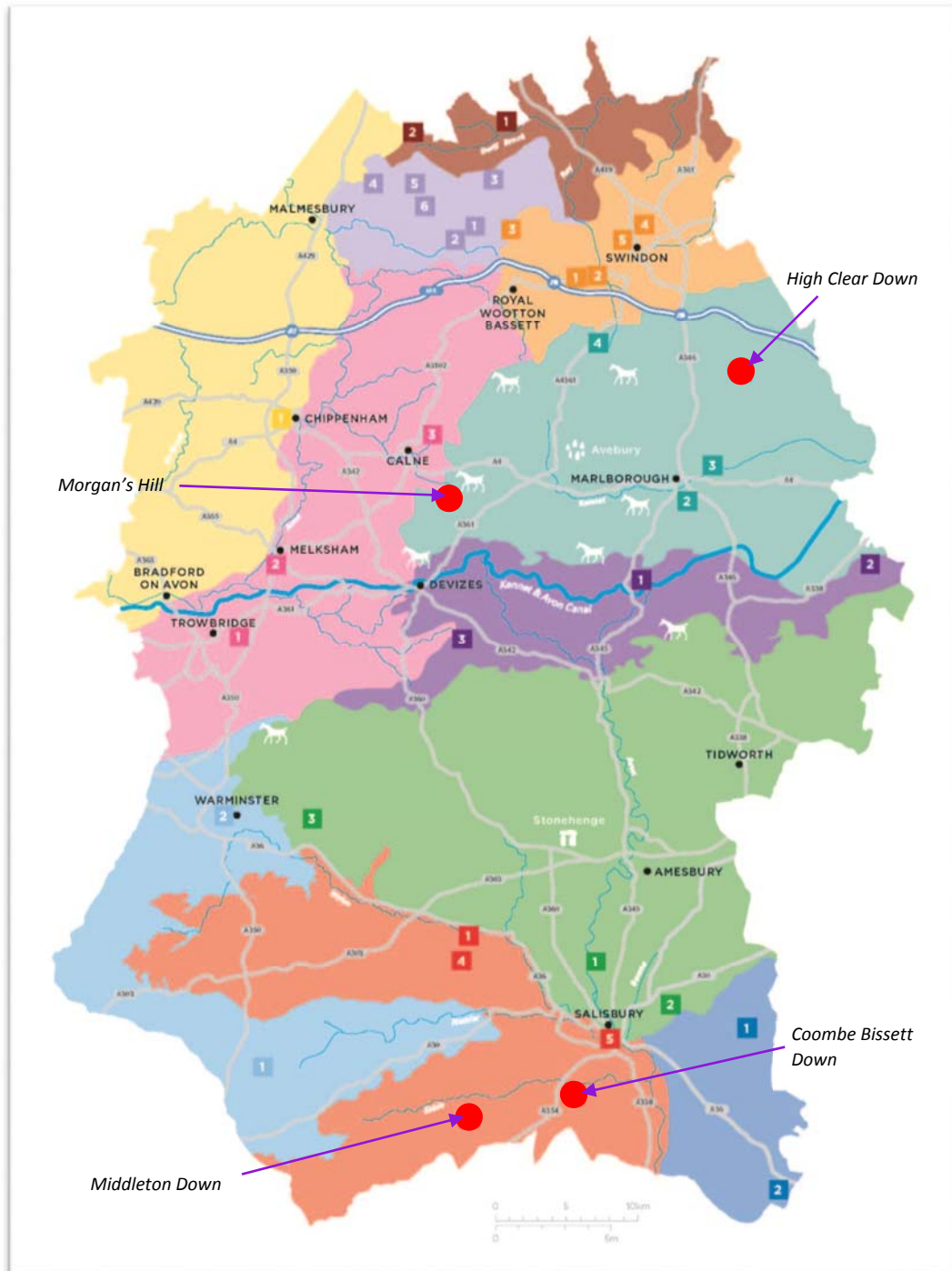
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Landfill Tax amount allocated: £46,361

Wiltshire contains the majority of Britain's remaining chalk downland. With 80% of the UK's chalk downlands having been damaged or destroyed over the past 60 years, the downland nature reserves of Wiltshire Wildlife Trust are of national and international importance. Their continued protection and enhancement is dependent on control of invasive scrub and achieving the correct intensity of grazing at the right time of year. The funding provided by the Hills Group directly supports the management of these sites and the Trust's farming operation developed to ensure the correct grazing is achieved.







## Enhancements

**Capital Works** – A new water supply has been installed at Morgan's Hill via a borehole which will enable extensive livestock grazing to be carried out all year round.

**Maintenance** – Maintenance has predominantly focussed on scrub clearance and ragwort removal as part of the long-term ragwort reduction programme. Fencing repairs have also been required at a number of sites.

**Use of livestock** – The Trust's sheep and cattle have continued to graze most sites and this has resulted in very good displays of flora and butterflies.

## Community Engagement

**Volunteering** - Management of scrub regeneration across the species-rich grassland was carried out at Coombe Bissett Down by the Salisbury Wildlife Group and Wiltshire Wildlife Conservation Volunteers.

**Monitoring** - This year a diverse variety of wildflowers were recorded from the central arable reversion compartments at the top of the slope at Coombe Bissett including numerous orchid spikes and horseshoe vetch, succeeded by betony, wild carrot and knapweed over the summer. A PhD student undertook a moth trap survey in late August as part of a comparative study between unimproved chalk grasslands and arable reversion. 165 moths of 11 species were recorded, with large numbers of UKBAP research species including the feathered gothic (*Tholera decimalis*).



**Nature Highlights during the year** - Sightings of butterflies during visits to Middleton Down over the summer included; small blue (*Cupido minimus*), Adonis blue (*Polyommatus bellargus*), common blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) green hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*) and dingy skipper (*Erynnis tages*).

Our downland nature reserves continue to provide a haven for a number of bird species that are in serious decline across Britain. This year breeding Corn Buntings and Yellowhammers were recorded at Coombe Bissett Down nature reserve.

