



Castle Hill NNR

Welcome to the National Nature Reserve

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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 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 and small blue 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 was originally funded by English Nature's Species Recovery Programme.



In June, the purple flowers of fragrant and common spotted orchids push their heads above the turf (pictured below). This is also the national stronghold for the much rarer early spider orchid, 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.



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 present, Natural England 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.

Activities

Every year a number of events and practical hands-on activities take place throughout the year which help a wide range of people to reconnect with their natural heritage. Volunteers are always welcome to help manage habitats, improve access and help at events on the reserve.

Every Tuesday there is a guided Health walk at the reserve, led by Brighton and Hove volunteers, it is a 2 mile circular walk over uneven ground.

10.30 Meet at the small car park on Falmer Road at the junction with Bexhill Road.

Bus 2/2a (Down's Hotel Stop), 22 (last Bexhill Road Stop) starting at 10.30am. One is for beginners, lasting around one hour, with a more advanced walk taking two hours.

Facilities

The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are in Woodingdean.

Location and access

Castle Hill lies 1km east of Woodingdean, between Brighton and Lewes.

By car: access to the site is by a track from the B2123 to Woodingdean. There is a car park just off the B2123 at grid reference TQ356063.

By public transport: The nearest train station is Falmer, 3 km to the north, served by Southern Rail, and there is a mainline train station in Brighton. Bus services between Brighton, Falmer and Woodingdean are provided by the Brighton & Hove Bus and Coach Company.

By bike: The reserve is near the path of the South Downs Way National Trail and Route 89 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network.

Castle Hill bye-laws

A series of byelaws are in force to protect the wildlife of the site, and ensure that as many people as possible can enjoy its beauty.

- Camping or lighting fires is prohibited.
- Please also take all litter home with you.
- Please follow the Country Code.
- Please keep dogs on leads to protect grazing animals and sensitive wildlife.
- Please take all litter home with you
- Please leave gates as you find them
- Mountain bikes and horses can cause severe damage to the turf and riders must keep to bridleways.

Contact

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Find out more at www.naturalengland.org.uk
or by calling **01323 423962**

