



Lullington Heath National Nature Reserve

Nature Walks





©Peter Wakeley/Natural England

Chalk heath flowers

Chalk Heath Loop

1.5 miles (2.5km)

Follow the markers Lullington Heath National Nature Reserve

Lullington Heath NNR lies on the South Downs between the villages of Jevington and Litlington. The 62 hectare Reserve is nationally important and was established in 1955 to conserve one of the largest areas of chalk heath remaining in Britain. Chalk heath only occurs where, by the remotest of chances, acid soils have been deposited on the alkaline chalk, allowing acid loving plants to grow together with these of the chalk.

Chalk heath covers just under a third of the Reserve. Elsewhere, bushes, chalk grassland and valley grassland form a patchwork across the site. Over 250 types of plant grow here. More than 98 types of bird have been seen, 50 of which nest on the Reserve, and 34 butterflies are listed amongst the hundreds of types of insects known to be

present. Badgers and foxes do well on the Reserve, as do other small mammals such as rabbit, stoat, weasel and several types of mouse, vole and shrew. The Reserve is open to access on foot and horse riders and cyclists are welcome to explore the site using the various public bridleways marked on the map. Please take care not to cause damage or disturbance; leave wildflowers for others to enjoy and keep dogs under control and out of the bushes, particularly in the spring and summer when birds are nesting.

How to get there

Bridlepaths enter the Reserve from the south (Friston Forest), the east (Jevington), west (Lullington Court) and north (Wilmington and the Long Man). Though the walk up through the forest is the longest, alternative pay and display parking is available in the Forestry Commission or Seven Sisters Country Park car parks.





Invertebrates

Points for your safety and comfort

Wearing footwear and clothing suited to rough walking and prevailing weather conditions and taking some refreshment particularly in hot weather will make your visit more comfortable and enjoyable. Please take special care to guard against all risks of fire as this area is particularly vulnerable to fire damage. During the war, the area was used as a military training ground and unexploded missiles are still found away from the public rights of way. If you find any rusty metal canisters, with or without fins, report this immediately to the address on this leaflet, or to the police. Metal detecting and camping are not permitted on the Reserve for reasons of disturbance and public safety.

The history of the landscape

Several thousand years ago, Neolithic farmers cleared area of forest from the Downs and cultivated their thin soils. Excavations on site have revealed pottery dating from 500-250 BC. Aerial photographs show remains of a system of ancient fields covering the western end of the Reserve. By 400 AD, the heavy Saxon plough allowed cultivation of the richer valley soils and the settlers moved off the Downs, leaving them as pasture. Sheep grazing remained as the dominate type of farming on the Downs for over a thousand years allowing herb-rich grasslands and chalk heath to develop. Grazing continued until around the Second World War. Thereafter, grazing was stopped to prevent pollution of water which is drawn from the chalk beneath the site for public consumption.



Herdwick sheep

This restriction was lifted in the 1970s but by this time scrub had invaded all areas of the Reserve except those kept clear by mowing. Since then we have been extending the open areas by grazing, mowing and scrub clearance so that the traditional short turf, rich in plants and animals, can be re-established.

To maintain the short turf of the chalk heath, grazing is essential. Herdwick sheep from a neighbouring farm are currently the main grazers.

These animals are hardy and well adapted to the relatively low nutrient situation on the heath. We also use Exmoor ponies from time to time to help control the invasive scrub, by grazing and browsing on leaves and bark.

From time to time, British White cattle from the neighbouring Friston Forest Project may be seen on the Reserve, adding further to the grazing required to keep the chalk heath vegetation in favourable condition. During the summer months however, grazing is relaxed to allow flowering and seed set.

The Nature Trail

1. On a clear day, the view south to the sea is breathtaking. The chalk heath, ahead and to your left, is pink in August with flowers of heather and bell heather, surrounded by gorse bushes whose yellow flowers smell of coconut.

The chalk heath is special because it is extremely rare for acid soils to appear on top of chalk, as they do here. A unique mixture of heathers and heathland plants such as tormentil grow amongst chalk-loving plants, including thyme and salad burnet. These attract butterflies including grayling and grizzled skipper.

As you walk down the track, notice the fencing necessary for keeping grazing animals. Try to spot some old furrows to the left of the track. These are from forestry ploughing operations in the 1950's. Ploughing was stopped when the Reserve was declared.

As you leave the open heath, with its short rabbit-grazed turf, you pass between gorse and other scrub, ideal for nesting dunnocks and linnets and shelter for small mammals, including the rare dormouse.



View of Lullington Heath from the east



Dormouse – handled under licence

2. The forest edge which borders the Reserve is mainly beech and sycamore, home to jays and woodpeckers. Turn right down the wide ride, following the Reserve boundary fence, past the wooden pony corral. The mown ride between the forest and scrub edge is a haven for chalk flowers such as vipers' bugloss and early purple orchids. The area on the forest slope ahead was cleared after the 1987 gales and replanted with native hardwoods.

[At the bottom of the slope, if you wish to shorten your walk around the nature trail, use the wooden gate to follow another right of way running up the valley. This valley is alive with birdsong in the spring. Garden warblers, blackcaps, wrens and lesser whitethroats join the nightingales in the chorus from the depths of the dense scrub. The valley soils in the Reserve are deeper than on the slopes and the grassland is therefore less rich in wildflowers.]

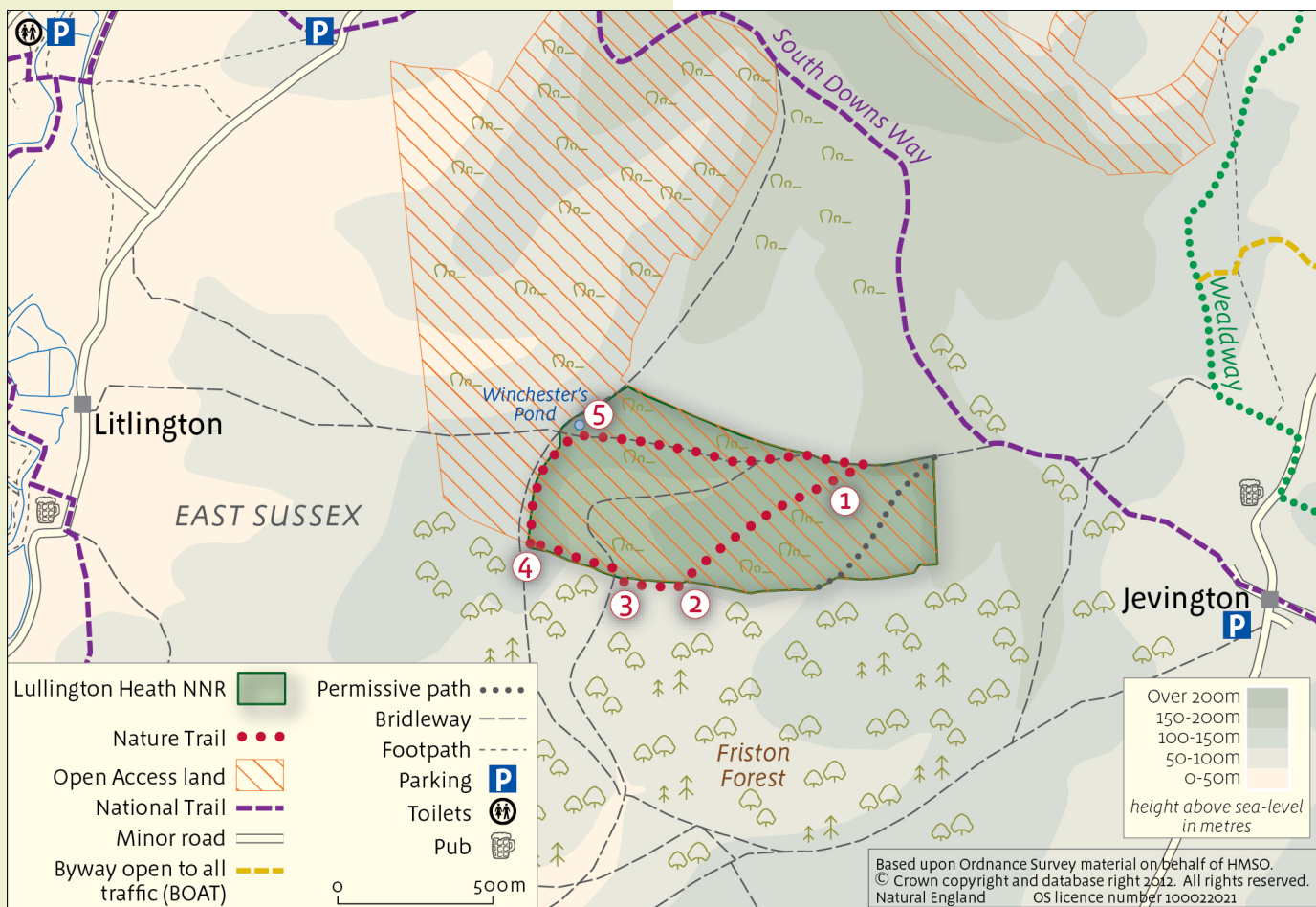
To continue along the guided route, go through the metal gate and turn immediately right to find post 3, marking the bottom of the grassy track running up the hill, parallel to the vehicle track.

3. This is an ancient neolithic track often called 'snake hill' as adders sometimes sunbathe here before moving off to hunt mice and voles in the scrub. In the summer, the track swarms with butterflies and other insects feeding on the nectar-rich flowers. At the top of the slope a right turn brings you to a set of black railings.
4. Inside the railings, the black box is an automated monitoring unit which contributes to national information on air pollution levels. The concrete cap next to it, covers a deep shaft descending to a huge underground tunnel (or "adit") built to collect water to supply to residents of Eastbourne. If you 'dip' through the bushes next to the railings, you will find a platform from which you can view the whole Reserve. This was created in the early 1900s by the excavated spoil from the shaft.

Return to the track and follow it to the right. Rabbit, grazed patches between the scrub are carpeted with thyme, eyebright, gentians, centaury and other chalk herbs. During the summer, speckled wood, skippers, blues, small coppers and other butterflies flit between them. In the longer grass, brown and marbled white butterflies may also be seen.

5. On the opposite side of the crossroads the kissing gate in the fence leads to an old dewpond, Winchesters Pond. This was originally created as a traditional water supply for downland sheep flocks and is now an oasis of dragonflies, newts and other aquatic wildlife. It is fringed with reedmace, bur reed, rushes and sedges and is an ideal spot for watching birds as they come to drink.

From Winchesters Pond, the main track slopes eastwards passing between scrubby grassland, resounding in summer to the song of



whitethroats. This area of the Reserve has the remains of Celtic fields, or 'lynchets'. Where the turf is short enough, these are visible in the form of ridges where soil and flint from the original cultivation still lie on the downslope edges of the lynchets. As the track rises up the chalk slope out of the valley, the grass banks on your right provide a display of chalk wildflowers, while the fields to your left stretch to the horizon, reinforcing the feeling that Lullington is now, regrettably, a small island of wildlife in the sea of agriculture.

Contact

East Sussex National Nature Reserves Team
 Green Barn, Gayles Farm,
 Seaford Road, Friston
 East Sussex
 BN20 0BA

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

Front cover photograph:
© Peter Wakely/Natural England



Natural England is here to secure a healthy natural environment for people to enjoy, where wildlife is protected and England's traditional landscapes are safeguarded for future generations.

ISBN 978-1-84754-248-9 Catalogue Code: NE362

Natural England publications are available as accessible pdfs from:
www.naturalengland.org.uk/publications

Should an alternative format of this publication be required, please contact our enquiries line for more information: 0845 600 3078 or email enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk

Printed on stock comprising 75% recycled fibre.

www.naturalengland.org.uk

This note/report/publication is published by Natural England under the Open Government Licence for public sector information. You are encouraged to use, and reuse, information subject to certain conditions.

For details of the licence visit www.naturalengland.org.uk/copyright

Natural England photographs are only available for non-commercial purposes. If any other information, such as maps or data, cannot be used commercially this will be made clear within the note/report/publication.

© **Natural England 2012**