



**Dorset**  
Wildlife Trust

# Fontmell Down

**Nature Reserve**

## Explore the reserve

Fontmell Down, Spread Eagle Hill,  
Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 0DT

**F**ontmell and Melbury Down is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), lying in the Cranborne Chase National Landscape. The nature reserve has stunning views across the Blackmore Vale. It has been designated with a European status of Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in respect of large numbers of the rare and endemic early gentian flowering in May. Partly owned by the National Trust, but entirely managed by Dorset Wildlife Trust, Fontmell Down is a 64-hectare mix of chalk downland, scrub and woodland, which provides a huge variety of wildflowers, including ten orchid species, 35 recorded butterfly species and many birds.

Ancient chalk grassland is now very rare. In the last 70 years it is estimated that 80% of Britain's chalk grassland has been lost. A well-managed chalk downland, such as Fontmell Down, can contain 50+ species of wildflower in a single square metre. They were created by man in the Bronze Age, during the forest clearance. Thin soils on the slopes made ploughing impossible, so the downs were grazed with sheep and other animals, producing the species-rich grasslands we see today. Chalk grassland needs to be managed as otherwise it will be invaded by scrub and trees. The habitat is carefully managed using a mixture of local organic grazing animals and manual cutting on rotation.



Early gentian © Ken Dolbear



Chalkhill blue © Ken Dolbear

### Location

Situated 3.5 miles south of Shaftesbury the main part of the reserve is on the west side of the B3081, opposite Compton Abbas airfield.

### Parking and access

Parking for the site is at the National Trust car park at Spread Eagle Hill just to the north of the reserve here at grid reference ST886187. Following the white arrows, this walk is approximately 3km, at times on rough, steep terrain so strong footwear is recommended! Fontmell Down nature reserve is open access, but please follow the Countryside Code.

## BECOME A MEMBER



### Help protect Dorset's wildlife

Dorset Wildlife Trust manages and protects over **40 nature reserves** in Dorset; safe havens for some of the UK's most important wildlife. We can only do this work with support from our members. Support local wildlife today and receive our regular membership magazine and a comprehensive guide to all the Dorset Wildlife Trust nature reserves. Just call **01305 264620** or email [membership@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:membership@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk)



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**Dorset Wildlife Trust**  
Making space for nature

Photo © Jack Clarke  
Cover photo © Graham Hatherley



# Fontmell Down

**1** On entering the reserve from the north east corner, soak up the amazing views across Fontmell Down, and beyond into the Blackmore Vale. Looking south west across the valley you can see a Bronze Age cross-dyke - a probable territory boundary marker or defensive earthwork.

**2** If time allows, there is an option at this point to continue through a gate south west into Littledown. This is a piece of chalk downland exceptionally rich in wildflowers, including a yellow carpet of cowslips in May, the broadest range of orchids on the reserve and other flowers such as knapweeds, eyebrights, hawkweeds and scabious species.



Pyramidal orchid  
© Ken Dolbear



Silver-spotted skipper  
© Jim Higham

## Visitor information

- Please be a responsible wildlife watcher and follow the Countryside Code
- Give wildlife plenty of space
- Take your rubbish home
- Bag and remove dog poo from the site
- Do not light fires or BBQs
- Cattle and sheep grazing all year round
- Dogs on leads at all times
- Be tick aware for yourself and your dog
- Do not enter ponds or rivers and steer clear of wet and boggy ground

**3** The rare early gentian which flowers in May and early June can be found on the south-facing slopes of Fontmell Down and several are often seen around this area.

**4** Arriving above the block of scrub, the route climbs diagonally up the western slope of this natural amphitheatre, where the warm, south facing aspect provides drifts of colour from chalk milkwort, bird's-foot-trefoil, harebell and horseshoe vetch. This latter species is very important for chalkhill blue and Adonis blue butterflies, being the larval plant for both.

**5** Nearing the upper third of the slope, this is the warmest part of the south-facing slope and prime habitat for one of Dorset's rarest butterflies, the silver-spotted skipper. Restricted to chalk downland in southern England and at the western edge of its range, this warmth-loving skipper flies during August. Its larvae feed on sheep's fescue grass.

