South Downs National Park Fact File

On 31 March 2010, parishes across Hampshire, West Sussex and East Sussex became part of the South Downs, the UK’s newest National Park. One year later, the National Park Authority (SDNPA) took responsibility for promoting its purposes and the interests of the people who live and work within it.

Habitats

Chalk downland is the iconic habitat of the South Downs but there are many others including heathland, ancient woodland, farmland, coastal and rivers.

- Farmland habitats (85 per cent – this includes some woodland, arable, hedgerows and other habitats)
- Chalk grassland (4 per cent)
- Lowland heath (1 per cent)
- Woodland (23.8 per cent) – approximately half of which is ancient woodland)
- Floodplain grazing marsh (1.5 per cent)
- Rivers and streams (321km of main river)
- Coastal and marine habitats (6.7km2, including 20km of coastline)
- Urban habitats

Rivers and streams

- The rivers and streams of the National Park support a rich and diverse array of habitats and species.
- Wildlife habitats adjacent to rivers and streams include semi-natural riparian vegetation, wet woodland and wet grassland, supporting invertebrates, riverine bird species and also populations of mammals such as water shrew, otter and water vole.
- The fish species in these rivers and streams include salmon, brown trout, bullhead, European eel and brook lamprey.
- Other freshwater habitats in the National Park important for their wildlife value include lakes, reedbeds.

Habitats cont.

- Chalk grassland - a rare and fragmented habitat of international importance.
- Chalk heath - very rare and especially vulnerable to neglect or mismanagement.
- Chalk scrub - can be species rich and of value to birds and invertebrates. Juniper scrub is particularly scarce.
- Ancient woodland - concentrated in West Sussex and may represent relict ‘wildwood’.
- Chalk sea cliffs - important for breeding coastal birds and for geology - in East Sussex only.
- River flood plains - contain remnants of formerly extensive grazing marsh and species rich drainage ditches.
- Inland chalk pits - important as geological sites and for pioneer chalk species and mosses.
- Arable fields - once an important habitat on the South Downs, now much less valuable due to agricultural intensification.
- Secondary woodland - usually develops on neglected downland after grazing

Traditional land use
Agriculture was the most significant influence on the wildlife of the South Downs in the past. The traditional system in living memory involved crop rotation and fallow alongside permanent pasture which was mostly open 'sheepwalk'. Sheep were 'folded' (fenced in by hurdles) at night on root crops or arable fields below the Downs thus maintaining low nutrient input to the sheepwalk.

The balance between arable land and pasture varied over the centuries until the early decades of the 20th century when the extent of scrub and land under cultivation started to increase at the expense of chalk grassland.

Forestry became a more significant land use, on the Downs during the 1920s and 30s when large areas in the east were planted for timber crops. The thin soils and adverse conditions meant that few of these plantations were economically successful. However, they contributed to the loss of area of chalk grassland.

River valleys in the South Downs supported mixed agriculture with seasonally inundated grazing marsh occupying the lowest parts of the floodplains.

Major land uses in South Downs

- Cereals
- Sheep and cattle
- Tourism and recreation
- Parks and large estates
- Forestry and woodland management

Sports undertaken on the Downs include paragliding, mountain-biking, horse riding and walking.

The popular Beachy Head Marathon (formerly Seven Sisters Marathon), a hilly cross-country marathon, takes place each autumn on the eastern Downs, starting and finishing in Eastbourne.

Longer events that take in the South Downs Way include a 100-mile running 'ultramarathon' and mountain biking 75 mile night time race from Beachy Head to Queen Elizabeth Country Park.

Rock/soil

- In the South Downs the main geological units are chalk, greensands and clays.
- The chalk sits on top of earlier marine deposits of greensands and gault clay, and terrestrial deposits of the wealden sandstones and clays, all laid down during the 45 million years before the chalk.
- The rocks of the national park are also very important because they are the raw material of the soils and some of the rocks are very important in supplying our water.
- The soils derived from the chalk are mostly thin, well drained and poor in both minerals and nutrients. The sandy soils of the Wealden greensand are acid and also nutrient poor.
- The chalk acts like a giant sponge, and stores water. This huge underground reservoir (or ‘aquifer’), feeds water from springs into streams and rivers.

### Elevation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of hill</th>
<th>Nearest settlement</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butser Hill</td>
<td>Petersfield</td>
<td>270 m (886 ft)</td>
<td>Highest point in the South Downs.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Plant and animals

- The South Downs is very rich in plant species. Nearly half of the orchid species native to Britain occur in the grassland and woodland of the South Downs.
- Orchids include early the Spider Orchid, the honey-scented Musk Orchid, the Bee, and the Early Purple.
- Other plants which flourish are the Round-Headed Rampion and the rare Early Gentian which like calcium rich soils.
- The South Downs Natural Area is also rich in animal species due to the wide variety of countryside from arable fields to chalk cliffs, wetland and ancient woodland.
- Bird species include Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Stonechat, Linnet and Skylark.
- Peregrines breed on the chalk cliffs whilst the plateau and scarp woodlands and scrub are home to birds such as the Nightingale and Nightjar.
- Also look out for Foxes, Badgers, Deer and Rabbits.

Animals

- The National Park is home to a large variety of wildlife including species such as burnt orchid, round-headed rampion, otter, skylark, barn owl and brown trout. You can also find less well-known species such as the barbastelle bat, the chalk carpet moth and sundew (a carnivorous plant).

- Many of the species found in the National Park are rare and are only found in the South Downs National Park. For example, the greater mouse-eared bat has only been recorded in the National Park and Bognor Regis in recent years. The last known British colony disappeared in 1985. However a single male was discovered in the National Park in 2002 and has been recorded at the same location every year since.

- Rare species are often only found in habitats which are also rare. The numbers of some species, like the Adonis blue butterfly, have recently started to rise as a result of conservation efforts and better land management. Some species are also actually doing better as a result of climate change as they are able to move into new habitats that otherwise would not be suitable for them – the silver-spotted skipper butterfly is a good example of this.

Climate

- The climate in United Kingdom is typically temperate; moderated by prevailing southwest winds over the North Atlantic Current; more than one-half of the days are overcast. The terrain: mostly rugged hills and low mountains; level to rolling plains in east and southeast.
- The South Downs benefits from the sunniest, driest climate of all of Britain’s National Parks

- Throughout the month of April daytime temperatures will generally reach highs of around 11°C that’s about 52°F. At night the average minimum temperature drops down to around 7°C, that's 44°F.
- In recent times the highest recorded temperature in April has been 20°C that's 68°F, with the lowest recorded temperature -1°C, about 30°F.

**Relative Humidity**
The average daily relative humidity for April is around 82%.

**Precipitation**
The average monthly amount of precipitation has been recorded at around 0 mm, that's 0 inches. Throughout the month you can expect to see rain or drizzle falling on 13 days of the month.

**Estimated Hours of Sunshine per Day**
We calculate sunshine hours per day using our past forecast data. For April expect the sun to shine for an average of 9 hours per day. This represents the average number of hours in the daytime that the sun is visible and not obscured by cloud e.g. the average number of hours the sun is actually out and shining. Note we calculate hours of sunshine per day using our past forecast data, not observation data, thus it is an estimate and not actual.

**Wind**
The average daily wind speed in April has been around 19 km/h, that’s the equivalent to about 12 mph, or 10 knots. In recent years the maximum sustained wind speed has reached 74 km/h, that’s the equivalent of around 46 mph, or 40 knots.