



Aston Rowant

National Nature Reserve



Welcome to Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve

What do you know about red kites, orchids and Nature's lawnmowers? Their stories are just some of the discoveries waiting to be revealed to you as you explore the reserve.

Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve (NNR) lies on the north western scarp of the Chiltern Hills, within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) overlooking the Vale of Oxford.

The NNR is characteristic of a Chilterns landscape. The majority of the NNR is chalk grassland, which is full of colourful wildflowers and insects. The remainder of the site includes areas of mixed scrub such as bramble and hawthorn, areas of juniper, and ancient beech woodland.



Our wildlife treasure chests

There are over 200 NNRs in England which are carefully managed to protect the most important areas of our countryside, Whilst these are homes for wildlife, they are also places for people, offering visitors a first-hand experience of nature.

Nature's lawnmowers

Grazing animals have been part of the Chiltern's landscape for thousands of years. They are very effective at keeping wildflower-rich grassland in good condition and controlling the spread of young scrub, to stop it dominating grassland areas. We graze the reserve with around 300 speckle-faced beulah sheep, a small herd of feral (wild) goats, and sometimes cattle from neighbouring farms.



© Natural England/Jenny Crook

In the right quantities, scrub can be good for wildlife as it provides food and a home for insects and birds. We have let some areas of scrub develop into taller, more dense patches, and these are managed manually by volunteers.

A journey through time

Beneath most of the reserve lies approximately 100 metres of chalk. The chalk was formed about 350 million years ago from the compressed remains of microscopic sea creatures that lived in the warm, shallow seas that once covered this area.

Flint is another typical stone of the Chiltern Hills, which is much harder than chalk and was formed from silica in the remains of sponge-like creatures that also lived in the warm seas.

Human activity has been part of the Chiltern's landscape for millennia. The Icknield Way is thought to have been in use for at least 3,000 years. During the construction of the M40, archaeologists unearthed a Saxon village and burial ground close to where junction 6 now stands and when the cutting was created, a Roman road was found which crossed over the ridge.

This history of human travel has created some striking features, such as the curious 'sunken ways' – remnants of eroded tracks that resemble wide-bottomed ditches. Like the M40 today, people used these ancient routes to travel through the landscape; farmers took their animals to market; merchants travelled between settlements with their wares; and woodsmen hauled timber and firewood down to the villages.

It's the pits!

The many pits and hollows on the reserve were once sawpits that turned timber into planks, or small quarry pits dug for flints used to build typical Chilterns houses and farm buildings.

Do you have time for wildlife?

We are always recruiting volunteers to help look after the site and assist with public events and school visits. Volunteers benefit from learning about conservation, developing new skills, keeping fit and also enjoying the social side of being part of a volunteer team.



© Natural England

Volunteer installing juniper guards

Learning through discovery

Aston Rowant has an exciting events programme with a unique range of interactive days out for all the family, which are often run in partnership with the Chilterns Conservation Board. Throughout the year you can find details of upcoming events on our notice boards.

We have produced a curriculum-linked teachers' pack which is available on our website. The pack contains our popular Sensory Nature Trail which encourages children's groups to get in touch with nature by using all their senses.

This place is for you, please look after it

- Follow the countryside code, take litter home and leave gates as you find them.
- Keep dogs under control when walking amongst livestock.
- Please be considerate to others and clean up after your dog.
- Please do not have BBQs or campfires on site as they can damage the delicate chalk grassland.
- Leave the wild flowers for the butterflies and bees, and for others to enjoy.
- Please note that the site is for pedestrian access only unless otherwise marked.

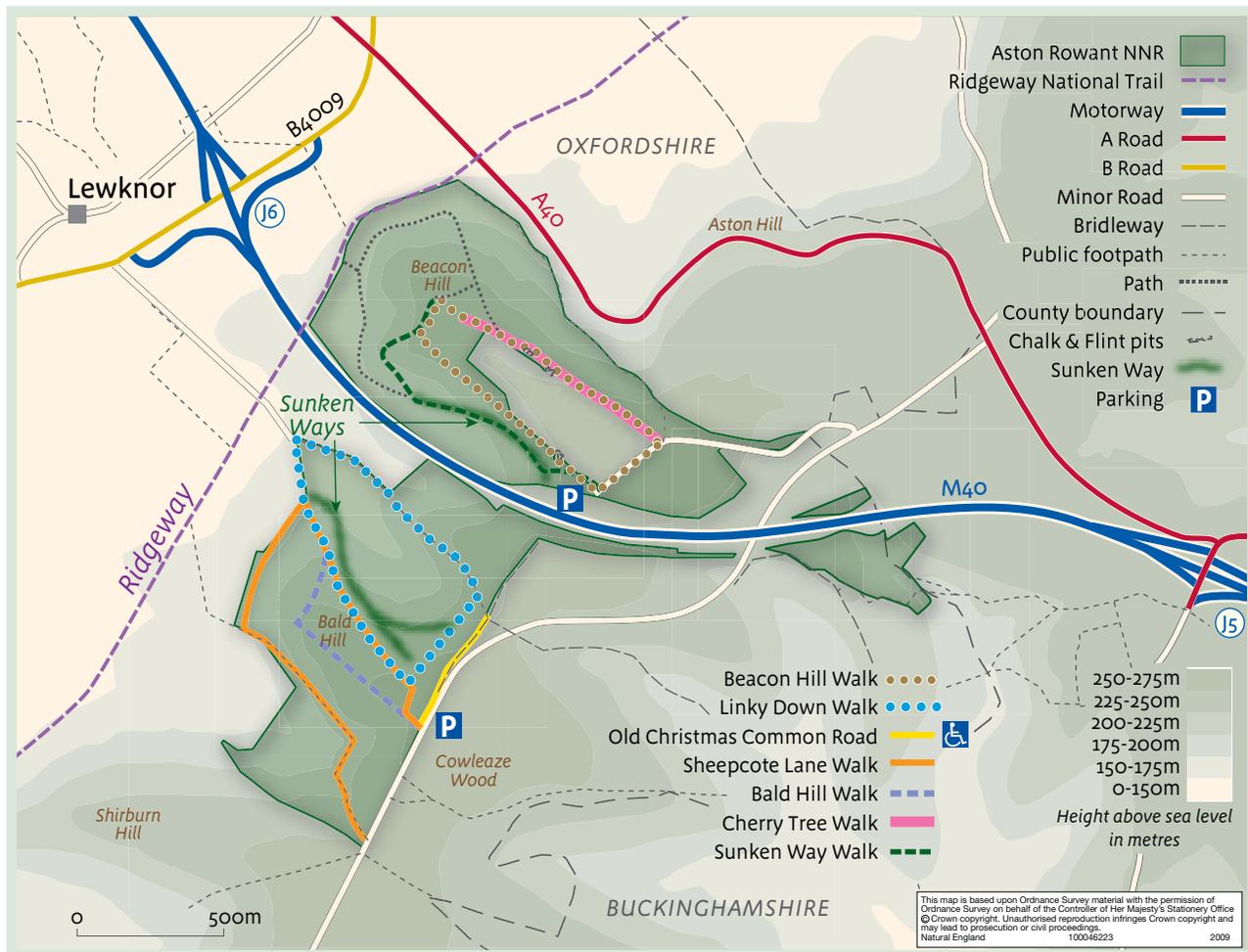
Travel

Why not leave your car at home and get to the site by public transport? If you are coming from Oxford or London, take the 'Oxford Tube' bus and alight at Lewknor, or if you're coming by bus from High Wycombe, alight at Aston Hill.

If you do come by car, there are car parks on each side of the motorway. Our main car park is on the north side of the site and is signposted from the A40 near Stokenchurch, whilst the Cowleaze Wood car park is situated on the south of the motorway, and is shared with the Forestry Commission.

The Icknield Way which forms part of the Ridgeway National Trail runs alongside the reserve and forms a link to a network of pathways within the site. When you have explored the reserve you could head down to Lewknor village to visit the information centre in St Margaret's Church.





Get healthy at Aston Rowant NNR

Medical evidence shows that contact with the natural environment improves health and wellbeing, prevents disease and helps people recover from illness. This evidence also shows that experiencing nature in the outdoors can help tackle childhood obesity, coronary heart disease, stress and mental health problems.

All 192 hectares of Aston Rowant NNR are open for exploration. The walks at Aston Rowant will help you towards your recommended 10,000 steps a day:

- Beacon Hill walk is approximately 2,440 steps
- Linky Down walk is approximately 3220 steps.

Spring

The drumming of the woodpecker in the woodlands, trying to attract a mate is a sure sign that spring is on the way. The chiff-chaff is one of the first migrant birds to be heard on the reserve, and is named after its distinctive call. Keen birders should also look out for passage migrants such as wheatear and ring ouzel that can often be seen on Linky Down.

You will see a wide range of trees and shrubs in blossom in spring. These include the lovely white flowers of whitebeam and wayfaring tree; and the woods come to life with bluebells that were once thought to be enchanted – people believed that fairies were summoned by the ringing of bluebells.



© Natural England/Dr Chris Gibson

Yellowhammer – can be spotted in hedgerows and singing on fence posts. Its song is said to sound like 'Little bit of bread and no cheese'.

Summer

In summer, Aston Rowant NNR is the place to be. Breathe in the scent of thyme, basil and marjoram as you watch butterflies take to the air all around you. Amongst them are the silver spotted skipper – a small, rare butterfly, which is a strong, fast flyer; the chalkhill blue – an attractive silvery-blue butterfly that can be seen feeding from purple flowers; and the marbled white – a distinctive black and white butterfly that drops its eggs on the wing.



© Natural England/John Martin

Common spotted orchid – can be found throughout the grassland, its colour can vary from white through to dark pink. Pyramidal, greater butterfly, frog, bee and fragrant orchids can also be found on the reserve.



© Natural England/RC Silverwood

Chiltern gentian – in August and September there is a spectacular display of this nationally scarce plant.

World's smallest farms

Examine the grassy bumps dotted over the grasslands to discover the world's smallest farms, with the highest number of farmers and livestock! There are around 100,000 of these 'farms' on Aston Rowant; they are in fact ant-hills, many of them are over a hundred years old.

The farmers are yellow meadow ants; workers which feed the colony by farming greenfly that live on the roots of plants that surround an ant hill. The greenfly suck up plant juices and turn them into a sugar rich honeydew which the ants 'tickle' out of them to feed to others.

Each ant hill has a queen which lays eggs continuously, and there are around 5,000 ants in each mound. We estimate that there are 500 million yellow meadow ants at Aston Rowant, and that's not counting the 20 other types of ant that are present!



Autumn

Fungitastic! The name of our annual fungi foray says it all about Aston Rowant in the autumn. You can discover a range of fungi of all shapes and sizes from the spherical King Alfred's cakes, through the range of delicate bonnets to the foul smelling stinkhorn. You are likely to see the common puffball which starts out covered in tiny warts that become a thin brown skin from which the spores erupt; or a spongy fungus called birch polypore that was once used to sharpen razor blades.

Autumn is also the time to see the brightly-coloured berries of whitebeam and hawthorn and glimpse ripening nuts on the hazel trees. You may see the redwing – an autumn/ winter visitor that feeds in fields and hedgerows and is often seen in flocks with fieldfare.



© Natural England/Robert Barber

Porcelain fungus – Also known as poached egg fungus. It has a glistening white slimy cap.

Winter

Winter is here but the reserve is more alive than you might imagine! This is the best time to see birds of prey on the reserve and the more secretive woodland animals as the trees have lost their leaves. You can watch red kites all year round at Aston Rowant, although winter is the best time to see them.

The dark green of the yew tree is distinctive in the landscape even when covered in snow! The roe deer can occasionally be seen at dawn and dusk by quiet visitors and you may also spot herds of the larger fallow deer. Muntjac deer can be glimpsed in the wooded areas and their unusual 'bark' is often heard at dusk.

Juniper – a recovery programme for juniper is ongoing on the reserve as the bushes are home to many rare insects. The berries of juniper were once used to flavour gin or as an alternative to pepper.



Red kites – an old friend back for good

Red kites were once common across Great Britain, but they were hunted to extinction across England and Scotland by the end of the 20th century as people believed they were killing lambs and game birds. In fact, red kites are mainly scavengers, unable to kill anything larger than a young rabbit.

There are now over 300 pairs of red kites breeding in the Chilterns, following a 5 year re-introduction scheme that has proved a great success.



© Natural England/Helen Olive

Other birds of prey

The buzzard is slightly smaller than the red kite and is dark brown in colour with a creamy white underside. The tail is fanned as opposed to the forked tail of the kite. Kestrels are much smaller and can be seen hovering over the downland.



Front cover photograph: Chalk Grassland
© Chilterns Conservation Board

**NATURAL
ENGLAND**

Natural England is here to conserve and enhance the natural environment, for its intrinsic value, the wellbeing and enjoyment of people and the economic prosperity that it brings.

© Natural England 2009

ISBN 978-1-84754-135-6

Catalogue Code: NE169

www.naturalengland.org.uk

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 Defra Silk comprising 75% recycled fibre.