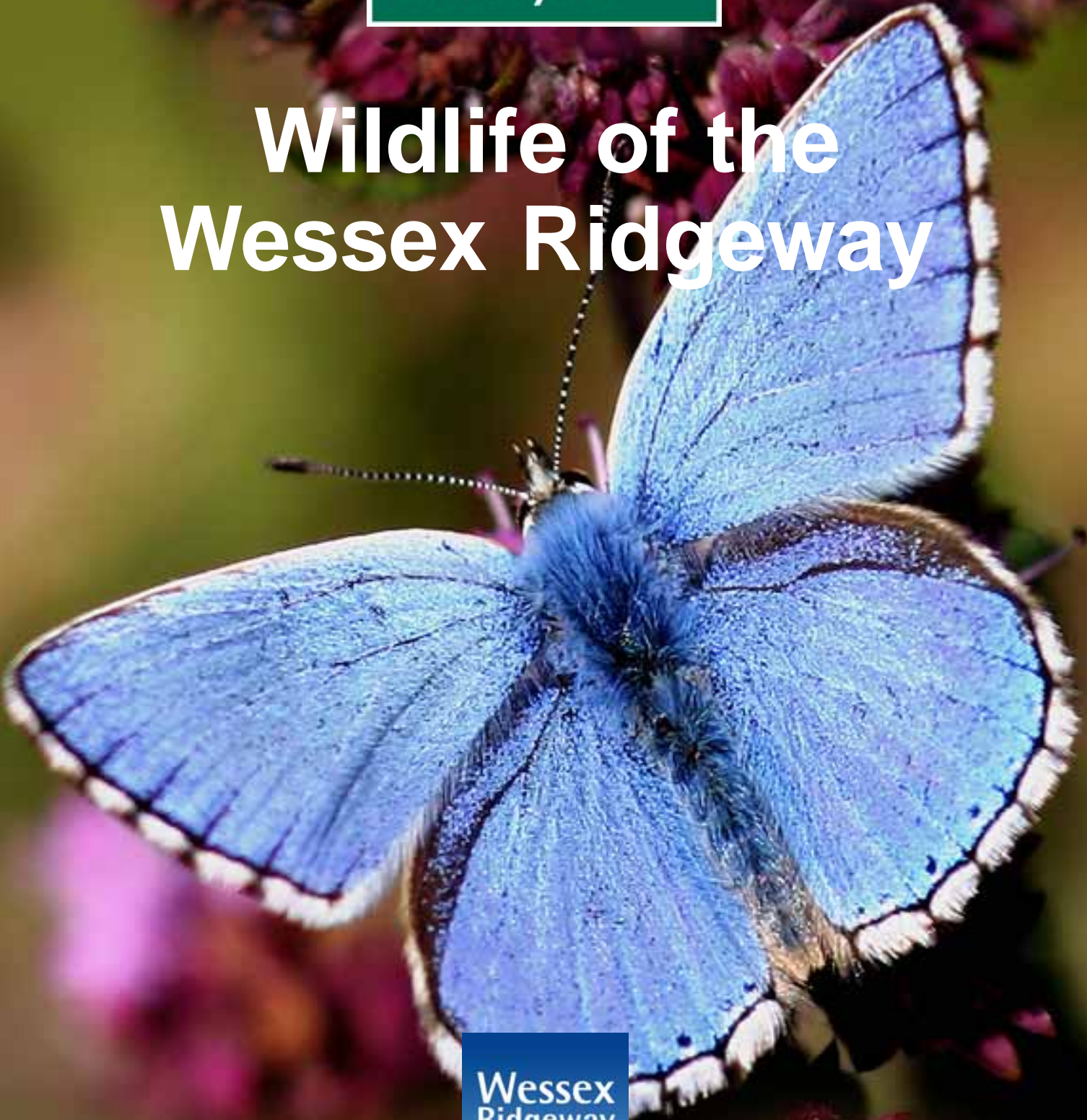
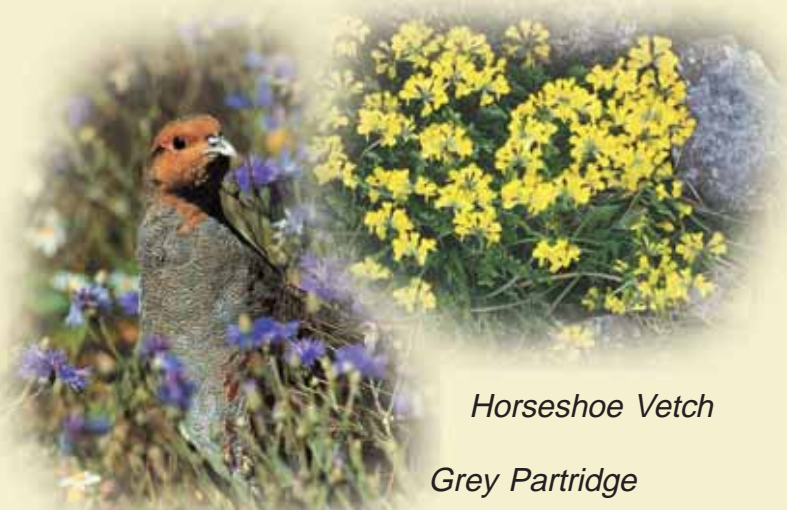




Wildlife of the Wessex Ridgeway





Horseshoe Vetch

Grey Partridge



Squinancywort



Small Tortoiseshell



Kestrel



Chalk Milkwort



Hawthorn

The Wessex Ridgeway follows a chalk ridge, which forms a 'back bone' across Dorset. Its dominant steep sided slopes, rounded hills and deep coombes have characterised the landscape and farming seen today. The steep slopes support grassland and areas of scrub and woodland, whilst the fertile coombes and flatter, clay vales have been ploughed to produce crops.



Linnet



Yellow Hammer

The Wessex Ridgeway is part of the South Wessex Downs Natural Area, which is internationally important for its chalk rivers and much of England's remaining chalk grassland.

Read on to find out more about the amazing wildlife found in this area and the best places to see it.



Corn Marigold



Sloes



Turtle Dove



Primrose



Water Vole



Tree Sparrow

Clay Vale

Both the Blackmore Vale to the north of the Wessex Ridgeway and the Marshwood Vale, in the west stretching from Pilsdon Pen to the coast, are made up of flat, clay vales.



Blackmore Vale

The Marshwood Vale is made up of a patchwork of small irregular shaped fields, copses, thick ancient hedgerows and marshy ground. Little ploughing or modernisation has occurred in the past, leaving a fascinating area for wildlife.

Marshwood Vale



On the north side of the trail, the flat expanse of the Blackmore Vale, spreads into Somerset. It is made up of large, mainly arable and dairy farms, with more uniform-shaped fields.



Heath

On the western half of the Wessex Ridgeway are isolated areas of heathland, with a covering of Ling and Bell Heather, Western Gorse and Bracken. This demonstrates the difference in soils along the trail corridor, the heath favouring acid caps found on the top of the hills.



Otter

Heath Hot Spots....

Remnants can be seen from Okeford Hill, to Hilfield Hill and beyond, but is best seen at Lamberts Castle, near the Devon/Dorset border.

Chalk Streams

Chalk streams are fed by groundwater held in the chalk. Plants such as Water-crowfoot, Water Starwort, and Watercress live in the centre of the river bed, whilst the purple flower heads of Water Mint and

" See, people don't realise their dog could be a danger to wildlife .. Keep 'em on a lead"



Protect plants and animals, and take litter home



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yellow Flag Iris can be found on the water's edge.



Good quality chalk streams produce an abundant insect life, which provide food for our native crayfish and fish such as Brown Trout, Dace, Grayling, Pike and Bullhead.

Hedgerows

Hedgerows act as wildlife corridors and link habitats. They provide a refuge for a great many farmland and woodland birds and animals. The thick hedges standing on large, often double, banks are amongst the most striking features in the Dorset landscape. During 1720 and 1840, fields and tracks were enclosed by the Enclosures Act. This created many of the hedgerows you see today, but some may have been planted over a thousand years ago. Field Maple, Wayfaring Tree, Blackthorn and Hawthorn are commonplace. Oak trees stand tall in the hedgerows, some over 400yrs old. During the autumn and winter, Blackberries, Sloes and hips of Dog and Guelder Rose provide a vital food source for wild birds.

The hedgerows start to come into leaf in spring and the wild flowers start to bloom. Plants such as Foxgloves, Red Campion, Primrose and Bluebell nod in the breeze.

In the summer, butterflies such as Gatekeeper, Small Tortoiseshell and Speckled Wood, flutter along the hedges searching for nectar, found in many of the wild flowers.

*Dog
Rose*

*Speckled
Wood*



*Red
Campion*

*Banded
Demoiselle*

Chalk Stream Hot Spots....

River Stour, River Cerne, and Sydling Water.

Chalk Streams are particularly important for mayfly and caddis fly larvae, which live under the water and emerge in the spring. Water beetles skim around on the surface, whilst the bright azure blue Banded Demoiselle dart along the rivers edge. Brightly coloured Kingfishers perch on nearby branches waiting for an opportunity to strike on unsuspecting fish. The elusive Water Vole can sometimes be seen swimming along the river edge.

Many of the UK's farmland birds such as the Song Thrush, Bullfinch and the declining sparrow can be seen in the hedgerows. Yellowhammers with their distinctive yellow head and front, and familiar 'little bit of bread and no cheese' song perch on the tops of many hedgerows, and the occasional Sparrowhawk flashes past, chasing its next meal.



*Song
Thrush*

Chalk downland

Chalk downland has developed on shallow, lime rich soils generally overlying chalk. These thin, infertile soils and the steep, south facing slopes, are ideal for fine grasses such as Sheep's-fescue, Meadow Oatgrass and Quaking Grass. Sun-loving, flowering plants and the Blue family of butterflies can also be found, a number of which are nationally rare.

Did you know ???
Chalk downland is one of the richest habitats for wildflowers, with as many as forty different species in a square metre.

From early summer onwards, the springy turf of a sheep-grazed downland is awash with colourful, aromatic flowers vying with each other for space. These include Ladies Bedstraw, Pyramidal Orchid, Squinancywort, Rock Rose, Chalk Milkwort, Dwarf Thistle and the rare early Gentian, as well as herbs such as Salad Burnet and Wild Thyme.

Throughout the summer, these carpets of flowers are covered with many butterflies and insects. These include Grizzled Skipper, Brown Argus, Common Blue, Chalkhill Blue, Marsh Fritillary, Small Heath and Marbled White butterflies. Also day flying burnet moths, Glow-worms, bright orange Soldier Beetles and the Great Green Bush Cricket.

Did you know ???
Two thirds of British butterflies breed in Dorset; most are residents and the remainder are migrants from mainland Europe.

Like many butterflies of the 'blue' family, the Chalkhill Blue and Adonis Blue have a close relationship with ants. The caterpillars have 'honey-glands' on their bodies, which secrete a fluid, which the ants like to drink. In return for this, the caterpillars are protected by ants which keep away predatory bugs, flies and wasps.

"The thing I enjoy about the countryside the most is the peace, quietness, space, fresh air scenery. Its really beautiful".

Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home



Pyramidal Orchid



Wild Thyme



Woodlands and copses

Semi-natural ancient woodland, small copses and mixed woodland dominate the horizon, especially in the far north of the trail and the patchwork landscape of the Marshwood Vale.



In the autumn, breaking through the dense, damp layer of fallen leaves, are the unusual and interesting fruiting bodies of Fungi. The bareness of the trees now allows the full appreciation of the mosses, ferns and lichens that glisten in the autumn sun.

During the spring and summer, Ringlet, Comma, Orange Tip and Silver-washed Fritillary butterflies dart around the woodland flowers in search of nectar.



Comma

Buzzards circle the trees, whilst Tawny Owls and Jays fly around in the canopy. Tree Creepers work their way up to the tops of the trees looking for insects in the bark and Spotted Flycatchers and various woodpeckers are on the look out for insects to feast on.

At dusk, bats such as the Pipistrelle and Noctule hunt along woodland edges and rides using their sonar to hunt flying insects.

Did you know ???
Dormice use the branches of Hazel and patches of brambles as aerial runways to search for food.



Day flying moth



Dwarf Thistle



Marbled White

Chalk grasslands provide feeding and breeding areas for many different birds, some of which are scarce, or in decline. Skylarks sing high up in the sky, flocks of Linnets feed on small insects and seeds and Kestrels hover above rough areas of grass hunting for small rodents like shrews and mice. Late evening brings the occasional Barn Owl hunting over the rough tussocks of grass for small mammals such as voles.



Ladies Bedstraw



Adonis Blue

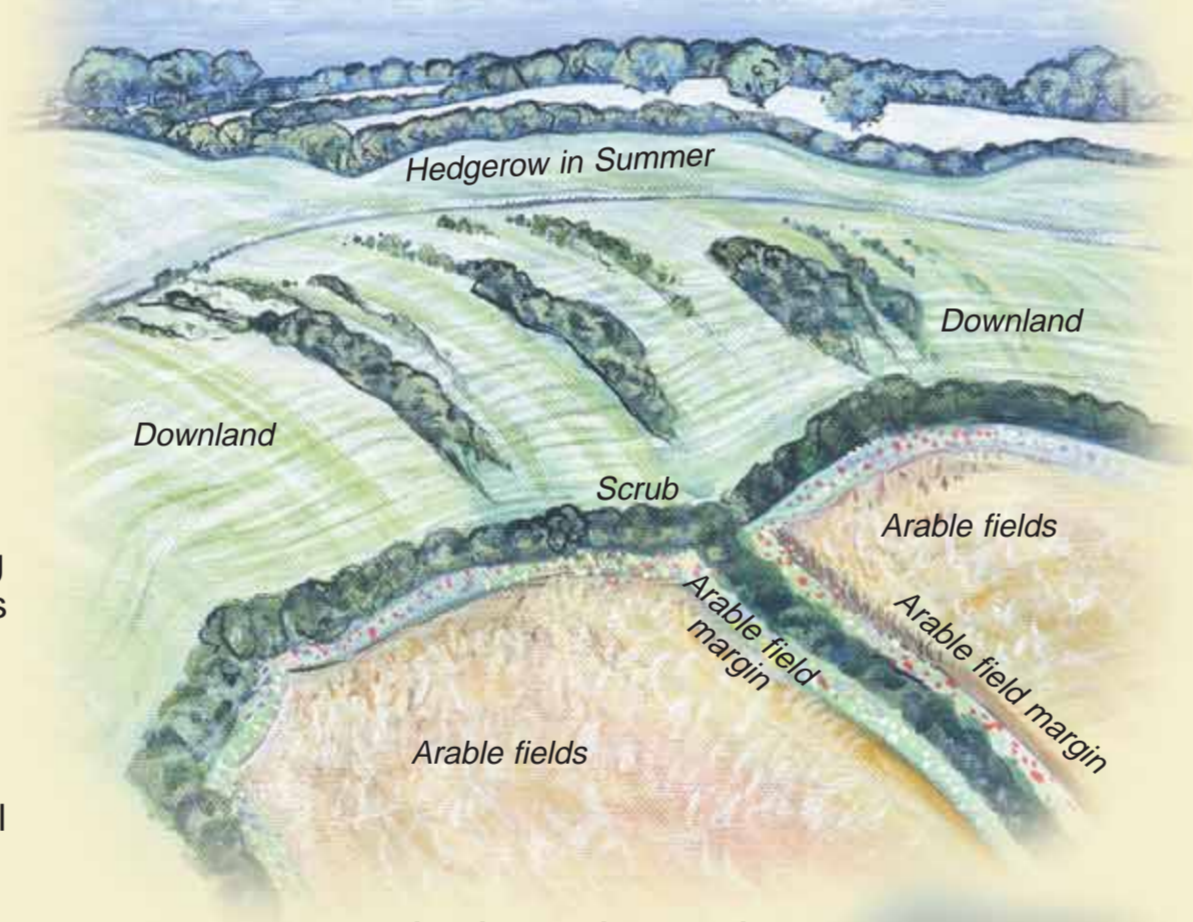
Grazing has shaped and moulded the downs for hundreds of years. Traditionally, sheep grazed these downlands by day, and were removed at night to dung on the arable fields in the valleys below, acting as a natural source of fertiliser. However, over the last 50 years Dorset's chalk downland has been in sharp decline. This is due to lack of grazing, chemical fertilisers, ploughing, roads, housing and landfill. The majority of the remaining chalk grassland is now found in Wiltshire, the South Downs, and here in Dorset.

Did you know ???
In Dorset, over 50% of chalk downland was lost between the mid-1950s and early 1990's.

Did you know ???
For over 6,000 years humans have been clearing and managing woodland, favouring oak for timber.



Wood Anemone



Artists impression showing typical Ridgeway Downland

Patches of scrub, made up of Hawthorn, Wayfaring and other Shrubs form a mosaic within chalk downland. They provide shelter and nesting sites for many insects and birds. Stonechats with their distinctive song perch on the tips of gorse clicking away, whilst Whitethroats and Linnets bob around, on the scrub.



Grizzled Skipper



Stonechat

Chalk downland Hot Spots.....
Most locations on the trail but notable places to visit include Hambledon Hill National Nature Reserve, Wessex Ridgeway Farm Walks at Buckland Newton, Hod Hill and around the Dorset Gap.

Woodland Hot Spots....
Shillingstone Woods, Ashmore Woods, and Turnworth with its pastoral woodland and majestic veteran trees.

Arable fields

The majority of arable land found near the Wessex Ridgeway is in the flat Blackmore Vale, the bottoms of the fertile coombes or the plateau tops of the chalk ridge.

Many Farmers work hard to combine production of high quality crops with the need to care for the countryside. One way is to leave margins around arable fields for wildflowers. These provide valuable food for farmland birds including Skylark, Grey Partridge, and Turtle Doves. They also provide nectar for a wide range of farmland insects such as bumblebees, grasshoppers, beetles, and butterflies. These in turn provide chick food for many of the farmland birds.

Did you know ???
Brown Hares live in shallow scrapes called forms, their tiny young, called leverets, are born furry and ready for action.

The wildflowers and grasses also provide shelter for over-wintering insects and spiders. Fields are left unploughed during the autumn and winter to provide extra food for birds such as Linnets, Bullfinches, Yellowhammers, sparrows and Goldfinches.



Ramsons

Common Fumitory



Harvest Mouse

Over 300 species of plants can be found in arable fields. During the spring and summer arable margins burst into colour with Poppies, Common Fumitory, Corn Marigold, Scented Mayweed and Charlock.

If you are lucky you may see a Harvest Mouse perched on an ear of corn or climbing around collecting materials for their nest. Stoats and Weasels hunt for shrews and voles along the arable margins and bats fly in the night sky looking for tasty flying insects.

Fields of set-aside and arable margins provide ideal cover for the native Brown Hare. These attractive mammals, rather like large rabbits with long, black-tipped ears are common along the trail and if you are lucky, you may see pairs 'boxing' as part of their courting ritual in spring.



Brown Hare

Leave gates & property as you find them



"You know, I think you should treat the countryside as you would treat your home....."

Arable field margin



Skylark



Dorset County Council working in partnership
Access · Conservation · Information · Recreation · Tourism

Contact:

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This leaflet has been produced with sponsorship from the following organisations:



Wessex Ridgeway Project

This exciting project focuses around the Wessex Ridgeway Trail (Ashmore to Lyme Regis). It is a community based, sustainable countryside recreation project co-ordinated by Dorset Countryside Ranger Service, to support and develop the rural economy, local communities and enhance the environment.

Key elements include:-

- Develop the Wessex Ridgeway Trail into a high quality, multi-use route.
- Sustainable tourism initiatives including baggage transfer scheme, local information points & promote public and sustainable transport.
- Local community partnerships through community led environmental, landscape and recreation projects, environmental improvements & 'Friends of the Wessex Ridgeway' group.

25% of the sale of this leaflet goes to supporting environmental work to look after our countryside for today and future generations

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