

2.3 Habitats and wildlife

The South Downs were originally covered by forest, mainly beech wood, and west of the River Arun they are still wooded in parts. Chalk grassland has prevailed for a long time, cut by five rivers. From west to east they are the Meon, Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere.

Grazing keeps the grass short and the scrub at bay, allowing other plants to thrive. Although in the past the South Downs had been ploughed for growing crops, it was the introduction of fertilisers and herbicides in the 1960s that spelled the end of flower-rich turf. Today only a small percentage of the chalk is still covered in flower-rich grassland.

Where the grass is 'unimproved', it makes a very rich habitat, supporting a wide variety of plants and insects. The best time for both wildflowers and butterflies is from May to August. The Downs are famous for their butterflies, and the National Nature Reserves are good places to spot them. Look out especially for the blues – Common, Chalkhill and Adonis.

Almost half of all British native orchids are found in the grassland and woods of the South Downs. First to flower in spring is the early purple orchid, followed by the common spotted and pyramidal orchid. Cowslips are also typical of downland, and you may see and smell wild marjoram and thyme.

In the woodlands you will see ramsons (wild garlic), bluebells and red campion. In July and August look out for the deep blue-purple round-headed rampion – known locally as the *Pride of Sussex*. Viper's bugloss, agrimony and yellow-horned poppies flourish along the cliffs in summer.



Common blue butterfly (male)



Cowslip

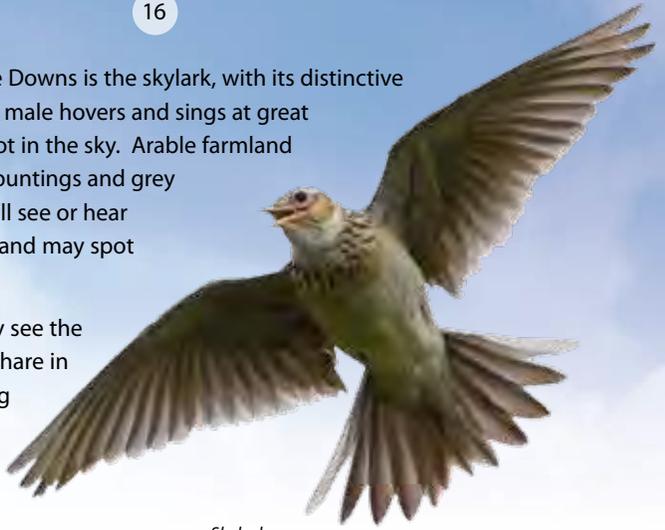


Common spotted orchid

Viper's bugloss

The bird that epitomises the Downs is the skylark, with its distinctive high-pitched melodies. The male hovers and sings at great height, often seemingly a dot in the sky. Arable farmland is a good place to see corn buntings and grey partridges. To the west you'll see or hear pheasants in the woodland and may spot buzzards overhead.

Near wooded areas you may see the occasional deer, or a brown hare in the fields or a stoat scurrying across the road. You may even see a badger, though sadly more likely as road kill than alive.



Skylark

Brown hare



Canada geese and goslings



The best bird-watching site is at the eastern end, in the Seven Sisters Country Park. During the winter months, the Cuckmere Estuary provides a haven for many birds, especially wigeon and Canada geese. Look out for cormorant hanging out its wings to dry; for shelduck with its black, white and chestnut plumage and bright red bill; and for dunlin, a small wader. Grey heron are around all year.

The cliffs are the realm of various gulls – notably herring, great black-backed and black-headed. Here, too, are fulmar – which despite their appearance are not gulls, but a miniature cousin of the albatross. They glide with wings held stiffly, flapping only occasionally. Further information about birds in the Park can be found in the Visitor Centre: see page 54.



Cormorant on the Cuckmere Estuary



Shelduck (male), with female at left