

Fontmell and Melbury Down is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, lying in the Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has been designated a European status of Special Area of Conservation 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 64ha mix of chalk downland, scrub and woodland, which provides a huge variety of wild flowers, including 9 orchid species, 35 recorded butterfly species and many birds.

**This walk assumes a start from the National Trust car park at Spread Eagle Hill map ref. ST 886187. Following the black arrows, the walk is approximately 3km, at times on rough, steep terrain so strong footwear is recommended! DWT's Fontmell Down nature reserve is open access, but, please follow the Countryside Code:**

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals & take litter home
- Keep dogs under close control, particularly near grazing stock
- Consider other people

**PLEASE NOTE**

Beware of ticks, especially in long grass, bracken and scrub. Please dress appropriately.

**Aubrac cattle grazing on Littledown**

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 wild flower in a single square metre. They were created by man in the Bronze Age, during the forest clearance.



**Buzzard**

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 otherwise it will be invaded by scrub and trees. A mixture of local organic grazing animals and manual cutting on rotation is applied on Fontmell Down, which is managed by: Dorset Wildlife Trust - the largest conservation charity in Dorset, with over 25,000 members. DWT manages over 1200 hectares as nature reserves in the county, inspiring countless people to love Dorset's wonderful nature. We are widely respected as a protector and champion of Dorset's biodiversity.

For more information visit  
[www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk)



*This leaflet and trail waymarkers have been kindly sponsored by Neal's Yard Remedies*  
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# FONTMELL DOWN nature reserve

## CIRCULAR WALK



Front cover photos: Cowslips on Little Down © Steve Oliver & Adonis blue butterfly © Ken Dolbear MBE  
Back cover photos: Grazing Cattle © Steve Oliver & Buzzard © Ken Dolbear MBE



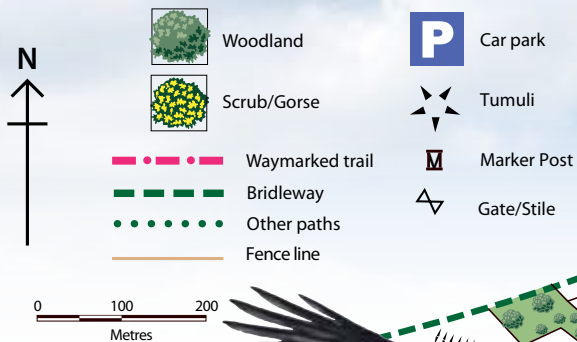
Part of a nationwide network of Wildlife Trusts

Protecting **Wildlife** for the Future



**1** On entering the reserve from the north east corner, **marker 1** is a great place to soak up the stunning view of Fontmell Down nature reserve, 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.

## Fontmell Down nature reserve



**2** If time allows, there is an option at this point to continue through a gate south west into Littledown, a piece of chalk downland exceptionally rich in wild flowers, 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.

**3** One of the reasons for Fontmell Down's conservation designations is the presence of **early gentians**, a species endemic to the UK, flowering in May/early June. Mainly found on the south facing slopes, several are often seen around this point.

**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.

