

Sunbathing on the Mendip Hills #mendipgrasslands

Where's the best place to sunbathe on the Mendip Hills? All living things love a south facing area where you can get maximum exposure to those rays. From the slopes above Wells all the way along to Hellenge Hill above Bleadon the south facing slopes of the Mendip Hills are a very special place for plants, animals and us.

These south facing slopes are covered in Limestone Grasslands; found on thin, well-drained, lime-rich soils associated with chalk and in our case limestone. The soil they put their roots into is thin and warms up fast meaning the plants need to be pretty special to live here.



The Mendip Hills supports the largest limestone grassland area of its type; shallow, sharply-draining soils, with an open swards (grassed area) characterised by the frequency of mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and annual/biennial species such as yellow-wort. The grasslands are exceptional as they support a number of rare plants typical of the oceanic southern temperate and Mediterranean elements of the British flora. It's like a permanent vacation for these plants as they feel like they're sunning themselves around the Med!

If these plants feel like they're on holiday all the time why should we care? Wildflower rich grasslands provide us with important 'services', often unseen but vital in supporting life. A wide range of wildflowers keeps nutrients in the soils; pollinating insects support the crops we need to eat; and because wildflower rich meadows thrive with low levels of fertiliser, this results in less pollution and water quality is improved.

Remember another of the Mendip Hills AONB Special Qualities is the Limestone Aquifer that provides us all with clean water, so the limestone grasslands are part of this process as well and are working while on holiday!

Most of these calcareous grasslands are maintained by grazing so don't be surprised if you find sheep, cattle or ponies nibbling away to keep the sward short. On really steep slopes in Cheddar Gorge and Burrington Combe goats are used to keep the bigger grasses down and let the sun-lovers bask away.



Don't worry about a bit of scrub, this change in habitat is an important part of the mix giving perches for birds and cover for rabbits.

Where are the best places for you to sunbathe with the famous Limestone Grasslands of the Mendip Hills? If you're after the views as well then you could hop from one nature reserve to the next; Hellenge Hill, Crook Peak and Wavering Down, Piney Sleights, Shute Shelve, Bubwith Acres, Draycott Sleights, Westbury Beacon and Deer Leap.

These Limestone Grasslands are very rare and internationally important, making them one of our Special Qualities. Combined these special qualities define the naturally beautiful and nationally protected Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



To find out more visit:

[Somerset Wildlife Trust](#)

[National Trust](#)

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