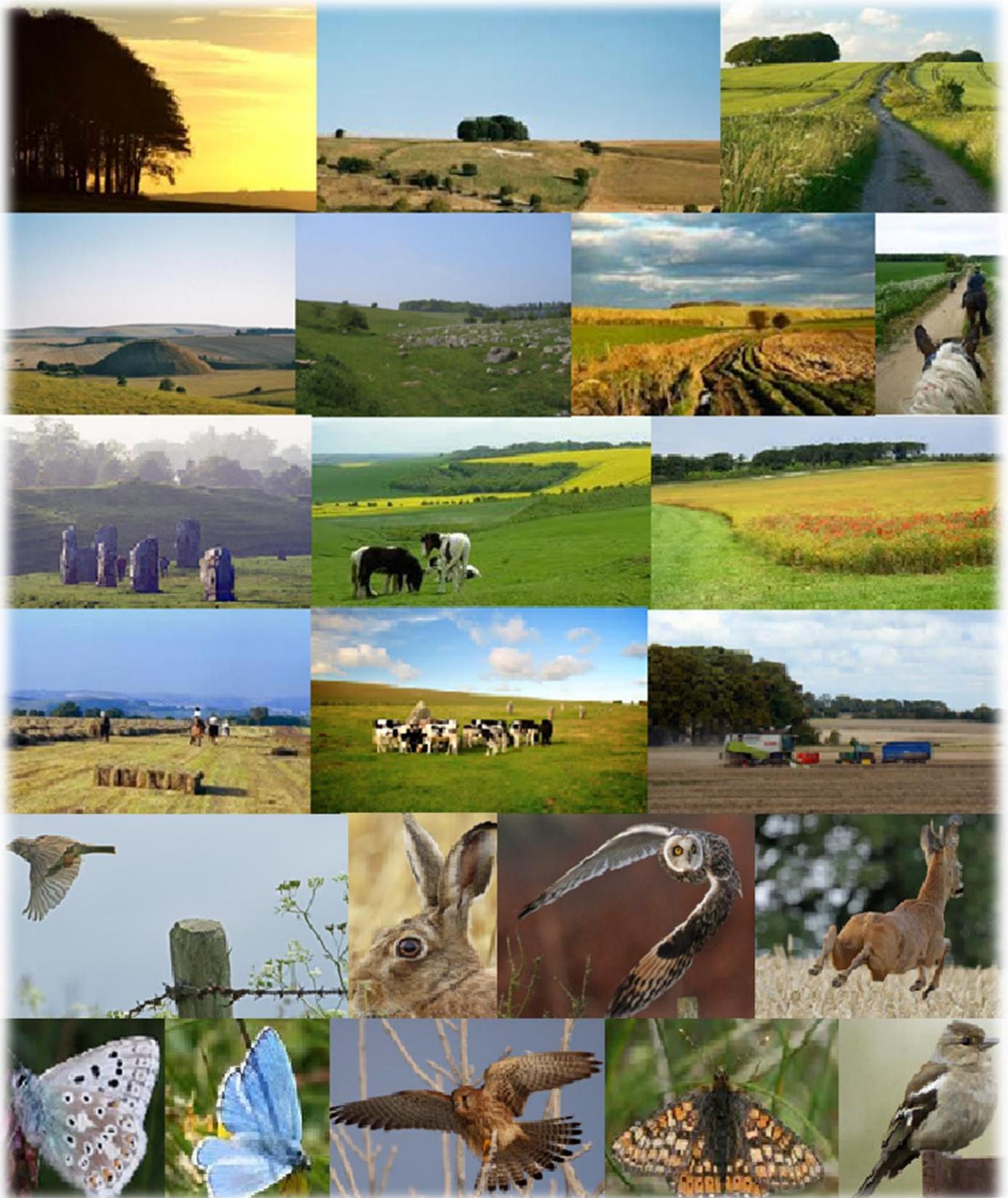


# Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area

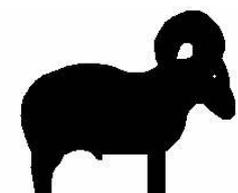


**Summary of Year 3 achievements**

Dr Jemma Batten

Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area Project Manager

Black Sheep Countryside Management  
Jindabyne – Great Hinton – Wiltshire BA14 6BT



📞 01380 871012

📞 07855 506112

✉️ [jemma.bat@btinternet.com](mailto:jemma.bat@btinternet.com)

# **Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area**

## **Summary of achievements April 2014 to March 2015**

### **Contents:**

INTRODUCTION	1
OBJECTIVE 1 – To enable appropriate management of wildlife sites	2
OBJECTIVE 2 – To consolidate the chalk grassland resource	5
OBJECTIVE 3 – To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance	7
OBJECTIVE 4 – To deliver best practice in wildlife management	11
OBJECTIVE 5 – To get the non-farming community involved with activities in and about the Marlborough Downs	12
OBJECTIVE 6 – To provide better public access	14



# **MARLBOROUGH DOWNS**

## **NATURE IMPROVEMENT AREA**

### **2012-14 SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the project's launch on 1 April 2012 we, the farmers of the Marlborough Downs, our supporters and partners, have literally created something from nothing. We have formed a brand new organisation and charity whose members are the farmers. We have forged a new and ever-strengthening partnership between the farmers, the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and the Local Authority, Wiltshire Council. And we've built from scratch, from the bottom up, a completely new project that has already begun to deliver significant benefits to wildlife and people in and around the Marlborough Downs NIA.

There follows a very brief summary of the activities we've undertaken in the final year of the Defra funded project and how these have contributed to the delivery of our objectives. We are very proud of these achievements and of the relationships we continue to develop with the growing list of individuals and groups who have become involved and supported us, either actively or simply by cheering us on.

Every single one of the achievements listed in this document is something that wouldn't have happened if this project hadn't existed. Although some work is being delivered via the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, we are claiming credit for only that which we believe is over and above what would have been included in ESS agreements anyway.

## **OBJECTIVE 1 – To enable appropriate management of Wildlife Sites**

At the beginning of the project there were 28 terrestrial Wildlife Sites (which are non-designated sites of local importance) in the Marlborough Downs NIA plus one which is a reservoir. Of the terrestrial sites, five are woodland and the rest are sites supporting grassland priority habitat. In 2013 Wiltshire Wildlife Trust purchased two sites which have since been added to the Wildlife Sites register, as have six sites surveyed by this project during 2013. Two further sites have been identified during our 2014 survey (see Objective 2), bringing the Marlborough Downs total to 39.

### *1.2 Agree appropriate management with landowners/managers, offering support to enable this.*

In the final year we have:

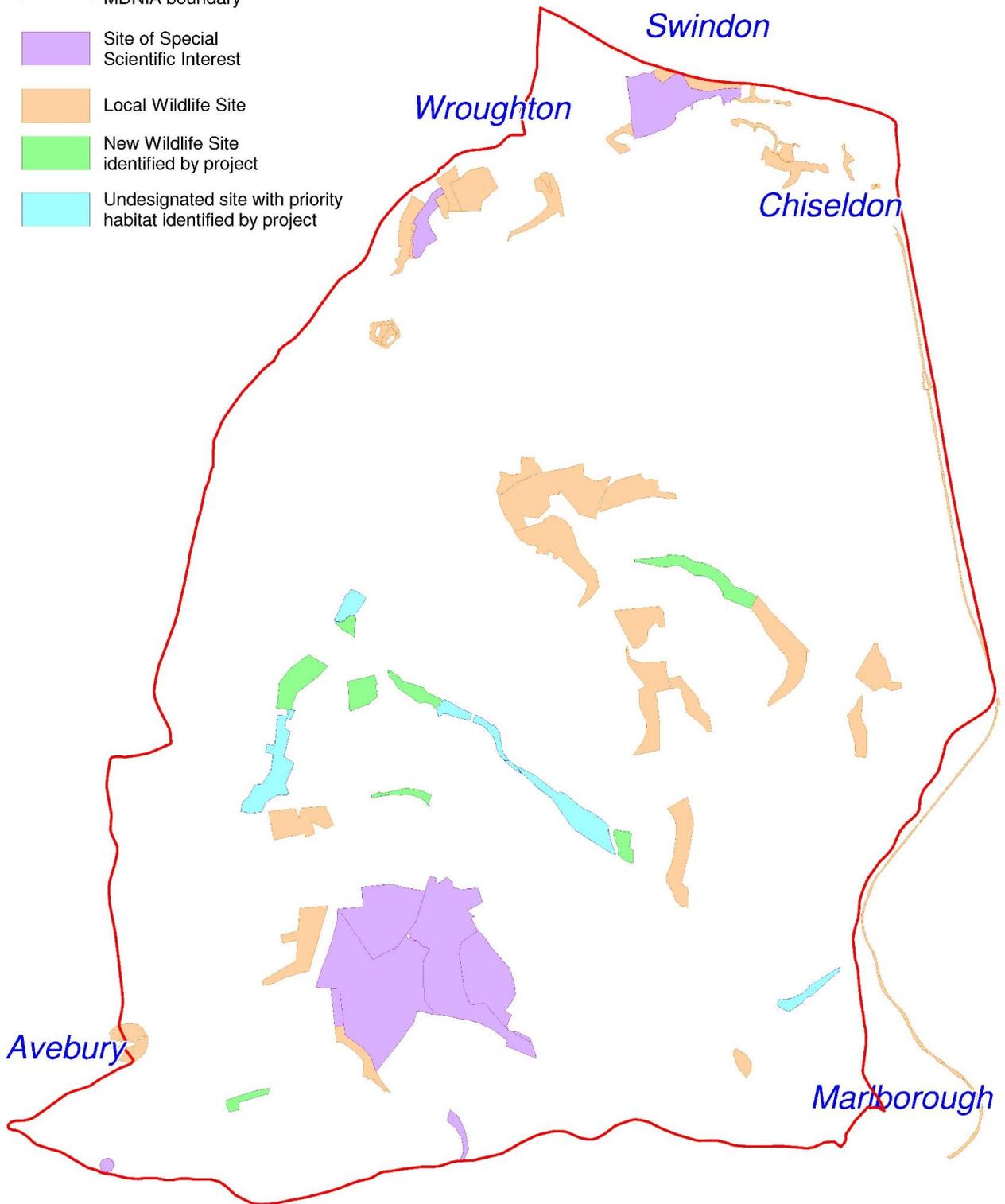
- Identified remaining sites assessed as being in unfavourable condition and eligible for NIA project support.
- Contracted a local consultant to work with the new owner of one of the new Wildlife Sites in unfavourable condition to prepare a Site Management Statement that includes information on:
  - Nature conservation importance, objectives and ideal management
  - Owner/occupier objectives
  - Agreed objectives and management – 3 year plan
  - Action needed to facilitate agreed management.
- Worked with owners/managers of five Wildlife Sites to address unfavourable condition and enable more appropriate grazing management by:
  - Cutting to control tor grass (1 site)
  - Renewing/repairing fencing (3 sites)
  - Installing water trough (1 sites)
  - Clearing scrub from chalk grassland (3 sites)
  - Loaning electric fencing (1 site)
- Worked with one landowner on an HLS application (now agreement) including proposals to deliver long term management on a new Wildlife Site.

### *1.2 Review sites to assess impact of management works.*

Six sites were re-assessed during the final year to record the nature conservation impact of management works such as fencing, scrub clearance, etc. which have enabled more appropriate management. It is hoped that this will form the first stage of an ongoing monitoring programme.

**Key to map**

-  MDNIA boundary
-  Site of Special Scientific Interest
-  Local Wildlife Site
-  New Wildlife Site identified by project
-  Undesignated site with priority habitat identified by project



**Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area  
Priority habitat - survey & condition assessment**

## **OBJECTIVE 2 – To consolidate the chalk grassland resource**

Aerial photographs show that many of the known chalk sites within the NIA are linked by almost continuous grassland. Although nothing can be assumed about the quality of this grassland in terms of diversity, there appears to be an opportunity to consolidate known Wildlife Sites by the strategic creation and/or restoration of species-rich sites and corridors.

### *2.1 Compile an inventory of the chalk grassland resource in the NIA by survey and assessment of non-designated sites.*

The majority of the survey work was undertaken in the early stages of the project. However, in the final year we contracted Wiltshire & Swindon Wildlife Sites Project Officer to survey and assess three additional sites to provide information on:

- Site boundary, extent of priority habitat, species list and DAFOR abundance.
- Condition assessment for each priority habitat.
- Impact of adjacent land use, including threats and potential for expansion.
- Current management and its effectiveness.

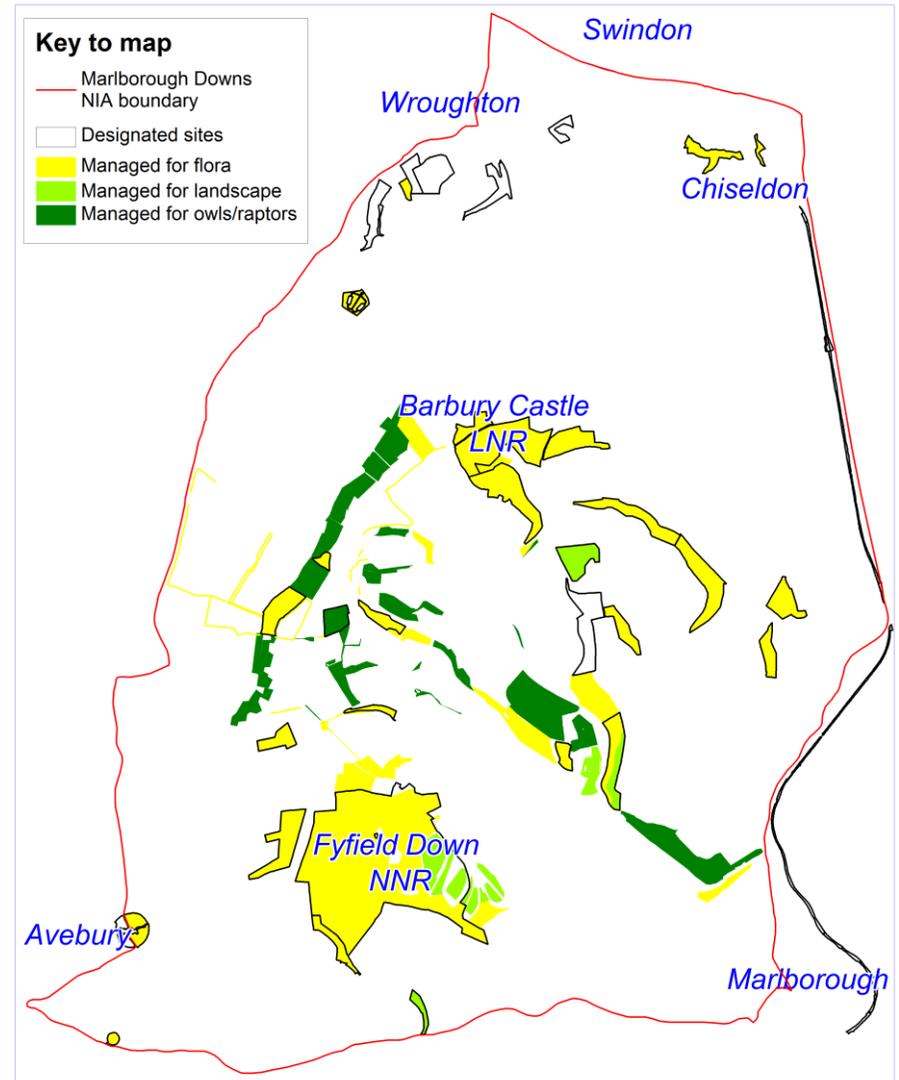
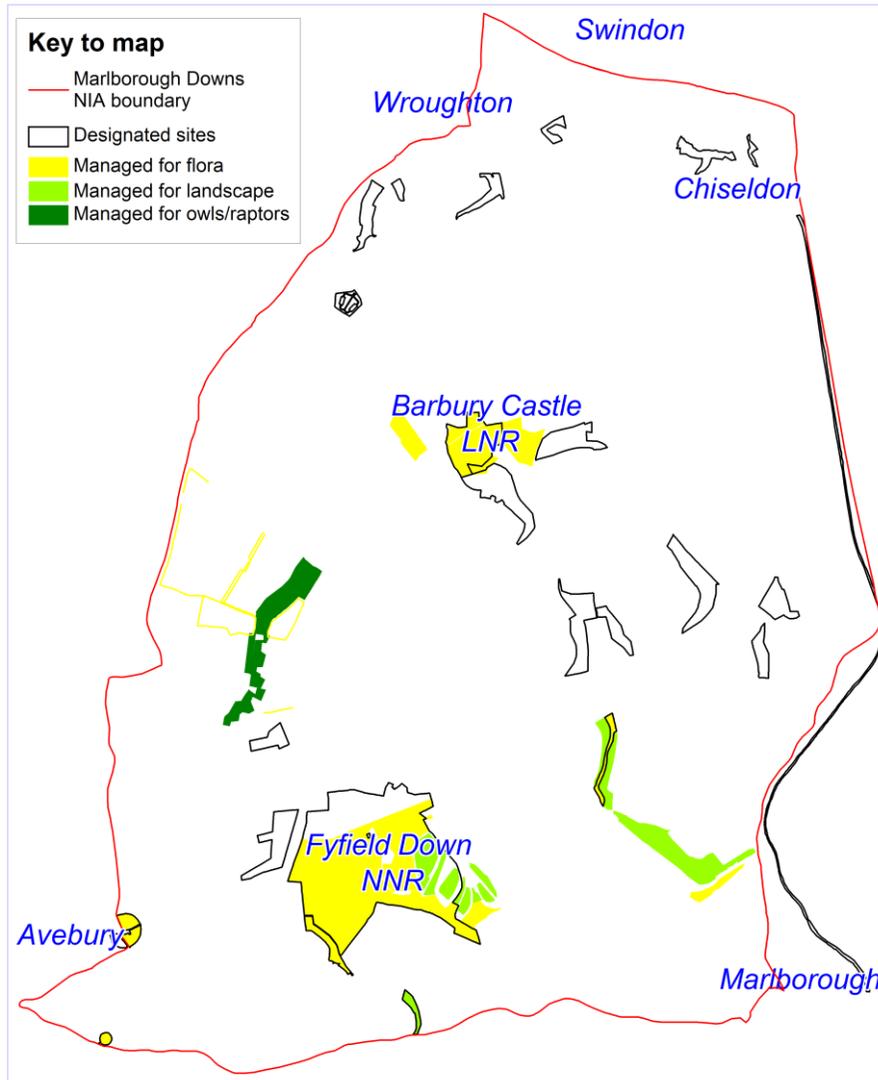
Digital maps were prepared to show site boundaries and extent of priority habitat. Of the three sites, two proved to be of sufficient quality to merit inclusion on the Wiltshire Wildlife Sites register, while the third may be eligible for inclusion this year.

### *1.2 Agree appropriate management with landowners/managers, offering support to enable this.*

- In the final year we have worked with the landowners of one of the new Wildlife Sites to prepare a Site Management Statement that includes information on:
  - Nature conservation importance, objectives and ideal management
  - Owner/occupier objectives
  - Agreed objectives and management – 3 year plan
  - Action needed to facilitate agreed management.
- We have also worked with owners/managers of four chalk grassland sites to enable appropriate grazing management by:
  - Cutting to control tor grass (1 site)
  - Renewing/repairing fencing (2 sites)
  - Installing water supply (2 sites)

### *1.2 Review sites to assess impact of sward enhancement.*

Two sites were re-assessed during the final year to record the progress of sward enhancement works. Both sites had wildflower seed sown into existing grassland in 2013. As yet, little change in the species diversity is apparent but at this early stage this is to be expected. It is hoped that these surveys will be the beginning of a longer term monitoring programme.



Maps to show the extent of grassland under positive management at the beginning of the project (left) and after three years (right)

## 2.2 *Create corridors and stepping stones of semi-natural habitat.*

We want to link grassland sites across the NIA to one another and to other habitats such as ponds and woodland. Even sites where priority habitat doesn't exist may be valuable for wildlife. Many provide foraging habitat for birds such as lapwing, owls, and raptors for example, and thus even species-poor areas are valuable elements of the grassland resource.

- Our surveys have shown that there is a very limited amount of chalk grassland in the NIA so we have worked with landowners to restore a further 53.18 ha species-poor grassland by providing seed to sow a species-rich wildflower mix into the existing sward.
- We also delivered workshops for farmers and land managers on managing linear habitats in order to enhance their botanical diversity and value as wildlife corridors:
  - Track and roadside verges (15 attendees)
  - Hedges (16 attendees)

## **OBJECTIVE 3 – To consolidate populations of species of national and local importance**

*To provide food and habitat for target species/groups of species on the downs by way of:*

*3.1 Planted wildlife crops*

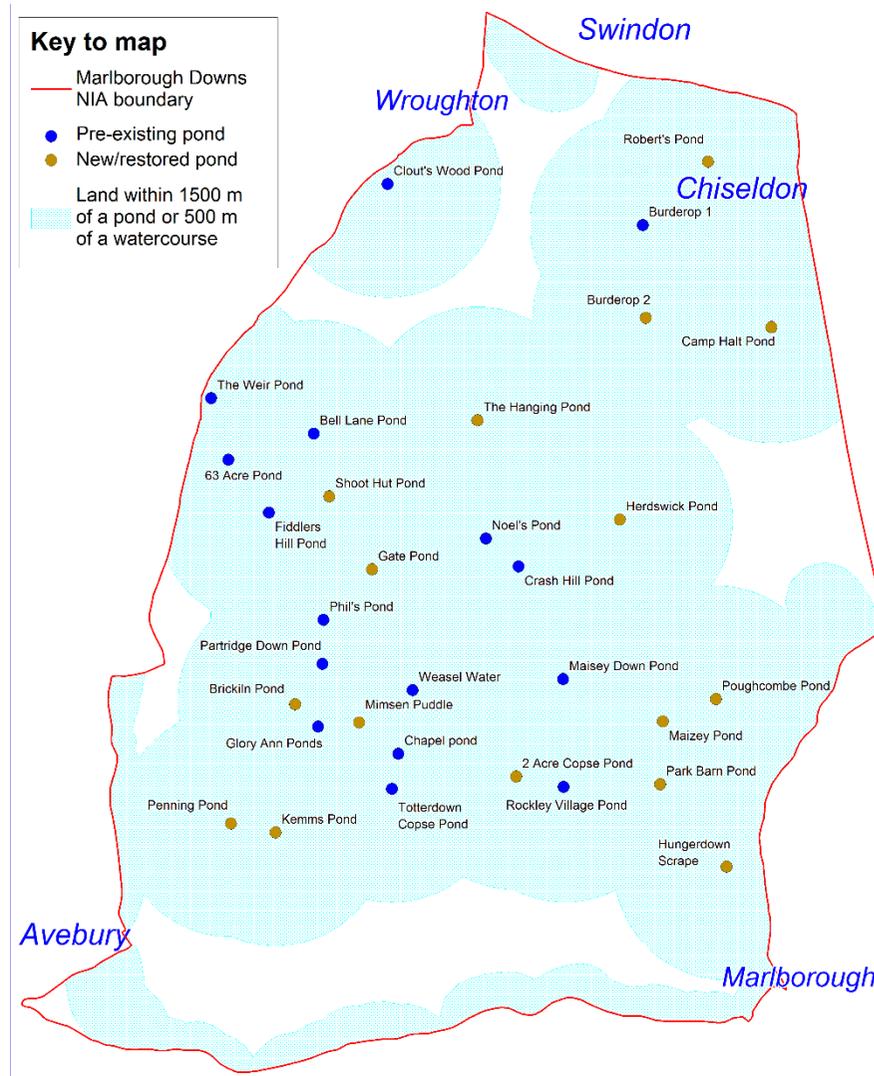
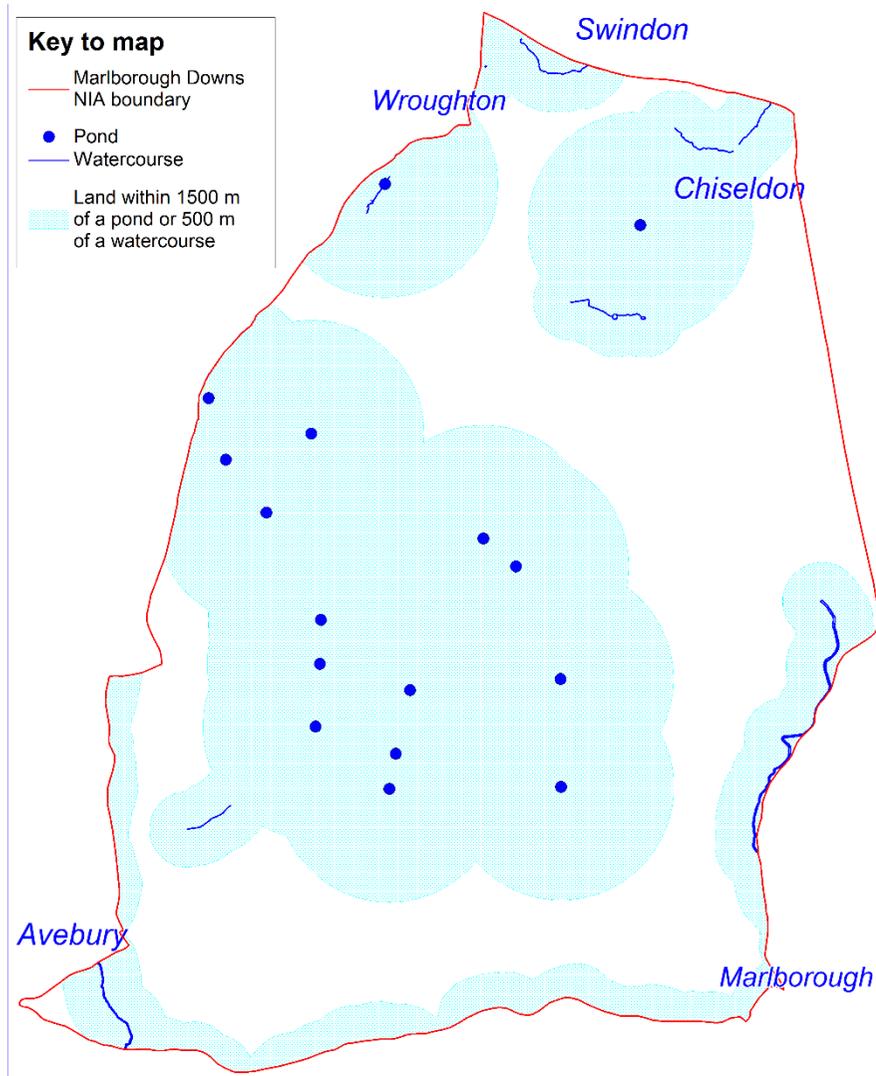
*3.2 Ponds*

*3.3 Feeding stations*

*3.4 Corridors of semi-natural grassland/scrub*

After three years, most of the nectar mix and wild bird seed plots previously established are now managed under HLS agreements and thus their long term existence is secured. At the end of the third year we have:

- An additional 6 ha wild bird seed plots to support tree sparrows and other farmland birds and 6.5 ha nectar mix plots.
- Worked with farmers and Wiltshire Ornithological Society members to provide 12.5 tonnes of grain on 10 farms to feed farmland birds through the hungry gap. This has been done partly by scattering grain into hedge bottoms, stubbles, bird seed plots and game covers and also by providing extra-large bird feeders which reduce the amount of wastage to vermin.
- Built seven new dew ponds.
- Provided 'starter packs' of a range of native, non-invasive oxygenating and marginal aquatic plants for each of the 16 ponds the project has restored or created during the past three years.
- Planted two new tree sparrow 'villages', 1100 m of tree sparrow corridor and put up 112 tree sparrow nestboxes.
- Distributed 10 new little owl boxes.
- Worked with farmers to manage over 260 ha grassland and scrub/grassland mosaic to provide habitat for short-eared and barn owls; raptors such as hen and Montagu's harriers, kestrels and red kites; and other farmland birds.
- Loaned electric fencing to enable grassland to be managed to provide habitat for owls and raptors.
- Delivered workshops on:
  - Providing and managing habitat for pollinators (15 attendees)
  - Pond establishment and management (20 attendees)
  - Ecology and habitat management for owls and raptors (40 attendees)
- Contracted a local ornithologist to undertake farmland bird surveys (using Bird Atlas and Breeding Bird Survey methodologies) on three sites in the NIA.
- Contracted Wiltshire Branch of Butterfly Conservation to continue UK Butterfly Monitoring Surveys on three sites in the NIA.
- Initiated and funded a tree sparrow PIT tagging project to learn more about the ecology and behaviour of our flagship species.



Maps to show the distribution of ponds across the Marlborough Downs at the beginning of the project (left) and after three years (right). Thanks to our efforts, the area of land within a mile of a reliable water source (shown in light blue) has increased by over a third to 86% of the NIA.

## **OBJECTIVE 4 – To deliver best practice in wildlife management**

As well as a contracted project management team, four delivery groups have been established, each comprising a combination of farmers, professionals and volunteers. These groups support the project management team in facilitating delivery of the project's objectives and promote best practice through the expertise and experience of group members.

### *4.1 To ensure that best practice is recognised and promoted.*

In the third year of the project, as well as those listed above, we have collaborated with others to deliver another two best practice workshops on:

- Reducing diffuse pollution to water courses, in partnership with the Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative and Action for the River Kennet (for farmers)
- Managing risk (for the project board and delivery groups)

### *4.2 To allow everyone access to the best advice, services and funding to enable high quality wildlife management throughout the NIA.*

The project team continues to collate a directory of recommended contacts, including relevant:

- Farm environment organisations and advisers
- Contractors
- Suppliers
- Local authority staff, including ecologists, archaeologists, education, parish clerks, etc.

## **OBJECTIVE 5 – To get the non-farming community involved with activities in and about the Marlborough Downs**

The buzz that the project has generated has been overwhelming and far beyond anything anyone expected. Over the past year we have continued to actively engaged people in a variety of ways including:

### *5.1 Events*

- Stakeholder events to inform people about the project, its objectives and how it's performing along the way, to encourage engagement and to provide a forum for networking between farmers, volunteers and other professionals:
  - Spring Celebration to showcase our achievements in 2013/14 (April 2014)
  - Open Farm Sunday at North Farm, attended by over 800 people (June 2014)
  - Summer farm walk/trailer ride and garden party on the Burderop Estate (July 2014)
  - AGM and Seasonal Supper, with guest speakers and project update (October 2014)
  - Third annual Spring Celebration, with celebrity speaker Adam Henson, attended by 90 people including Richard Benyon, MP and Andrew Sells, Natural England Chair (March 2015)
- 14 farm walks to showcase the project and demonstrate particular aspects of its delivery including a Dawn Chorus walk, a Butterfly Walk, a Herb Walk and, by popular demand, two Bat Walks and two Owl Prowls. These were attended by over 400 people in total.
- 18 talks have been given by members of the project team and delivery groups on the objectives and delivery of the project to a range of audiences including those attending the GWCT research conference, and the Jersey agriculture conference.
- 12 practical workshops have been delivered on subjects as wide ranging as planting tree sparrow villages, willow weaving, and reedbed creation. We have held corporate social responsibility workshops for Nationwide and Vodaphone, and a number of practical workdays for students from the Royal Agricultural University. We also hosted a day out on a farm for young people who care for sick or disabled relatives, during which they planted a tree sparrow corridor, made nest boxes and visited the cows.
- Altogether in the three years of the project we have delivered over 100 walks, talks and events that have involved over 4,500 people. We have already planned a number of events for the coming summer.

### *5.2 Multi-media*

- Articles about the project have been published in parish magazines, as well as various newspapers and journals, other publications and websites.
- We have reviewed our leaflet, which gives a general introduction to the project and contact details.
- A newsletter is sent out to all farmers, partners and 'friends' of the project three or four times a year (over 300 people).
- A Marlborough Downs NIA facebook page with over 300 followers is regularly updated with photographs and news: [www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA](http://www.facebook.com/MarlboroughDownsNIA)
- We continue to update our website and mobile Smartphone application with lots of information about the project: [www.mdnia.org.uk](http://www.mdnia.org.uk)
- The project has been featured on various radio programmes including BBC Radio Wiltshire's countryside programme and Radio 4's Farming Today.
- A further seven information panels have been installed at various points to inform visitors about the work of the project. In order to minimise the impact on the landscape and to discourage vandalism, some of these are mounted on local sarsen stones.

- Our local farm shop has a 'Conservation Corner' featuring lots of information about the project and our work.
- Working with a specialist media company we have produced three short films on the work of the project:
  - A general introduction to the area, our landscape and wildlife and the objectives of the project
  - A guide to pond construction and management
  - An overview of the work we've done to support farmland birds
- Along with the other 12 NIAs we have published a booklet summarising our work during the initial three year pilot project.
- We commissioned a local artist to create a legacy sculpture to mark the first three years of the project. This has been installed next to our local farm shop, adjacent to a main road and so will be seen by many thousands of people who, we hope, will be sufficiently intrigued to want to learn more.

### 5.3 Partnership working

The project has continued to engage with a wide range of local groups, including:

1st Chiseldon Air Scouts (cubs)	Natural England
Action for the River Kennet	Natural England
Avebury Parish Council	Nick Upton, Wildlife Photographer & Film-maker
Avebury Rocks (Prospect House)	North Wessex Downs AONB
Avebury World Heritage Site	Oxford Farming Conference
BBC Wiltshire	Pond Conservation
Bright Seeds	The Ramblers
Broad Hinton CofE Primary School	Riding for the Disabled Association
Bumblebee Conservation Trust	Royal Agricultural University
Butterfly Conservation (Wiltshire Branch)	Science Museum
Campaign for the Farmed Environment	South West Farmland Bird Initiative
Community First	St John's Academy, Marlborough
Community Foundation for Wiltshire & Swindon	Standing Conference on Countryside Sports
Countryside and Community Research Institute	States of Jersey Agriculture Conference
Defra	Swindon Borough Council
Flora Locale	Swindon College
Friends of the Railway Path	Syngenta
Fyfield and West Overton Parish Council	Three Trees Farm Shop
Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust	University of the Third Age – Bird Watching Group, Pewsey
Hawk and Owl Trust	University of the Third Age – Walking Group, Marlborough
Help for Heroes	Vodafone (CSR)
Isle of Wight Recorders Conference	Wiltshire Botanical Society
Link2Nature (Wiltshire & Swindon LNP)	Wiltshire Council
Linking Environment and Farming	Wiltshire Ornithological Society
Marlborough College	Wiltshire Trail Riders Fellowship
Marlborough News Online	Wiltshire Wildlife Sites Project
National Trust, Avebury	Wiltshire Wildlife Trust
Nationwide Bank (CSR)	Wroughton Parish Council

## **OBJECTIVE 6 – To provide better public access**

### *6.1 To upgrade PRow routes and furniture*

The project is working with local Rights of Way officers to identify a suite of high quality access routes (footpaths, bridleways and cyclepaths) where people can enjoy the Downs to the full and see some of the things the project is doing to support local wildlife. In the first two years the project has:

- Identified a further 27 miles of footpath, bridleway and byway across the downland landscape which showcase some of the project's achievements, including a long distance circular route around the NIA.
- Audited the routes on foot and on horseback where appropriate.
- Marked these routes with specially designed MDNIA waymarks.
- Installed 14 new gates to replace stiles on footpaths.

### *6.2 To promote access for all to the downland landscape.*

One of the farms in the NIA hosts the local carriage driving for the disabled group and the project has been working with them to:

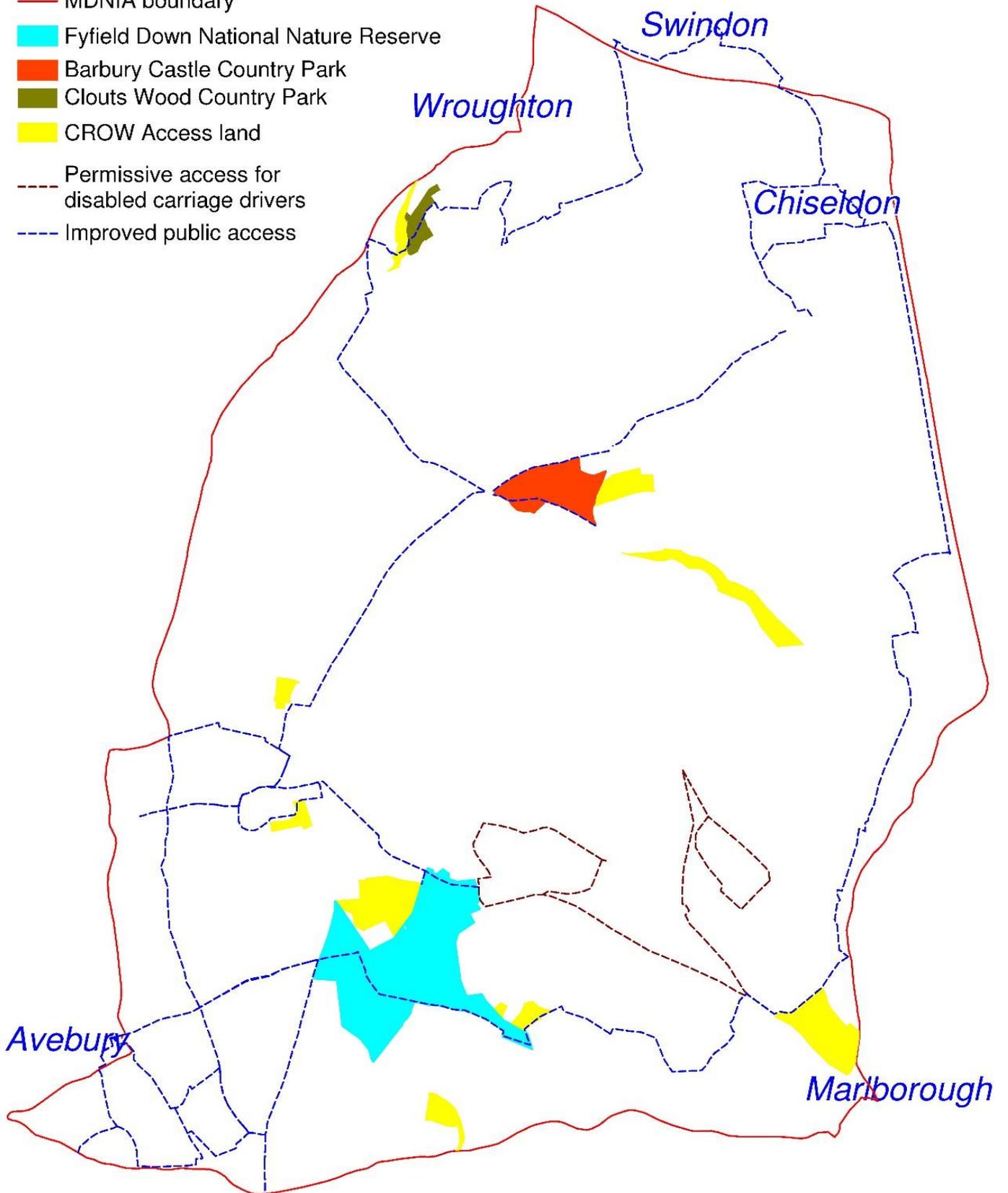
- Allow permissive access for the group across private farm roads, tracks and field margins.
- Upgrade a 3.5 mile stretch of byway which has allowed the group year-round access to the Downs. This involved £19,000 of grant aid from Landfill Community Fund and the Community Foundation for Wiltshire and Swindon. The launch of the new route attracted significant media attention from both local and national publications as well as local radio.
- Install information panels about the work of both the project and the DDA group.

### *6.3 To provide interpretation materials in a variety of media to improve access to the downs with minimal impact on the landscape and wildlife.*

To enable people to appreciate and understand the downland landscape the project has installed a further three information panels alongside ponds adjacent to public rights of way.

### Key to map

- MDNIA boundary
- Fyfield Down National Nature Reserve
- Barbury Castle Country Park
- Clouts Wood Country Park
- CROW Access land
- - - Permissive access for disabled carriage drivers
- - - Improved public access



Map to show improved access on the Marlborough Downs