

## 5.0 THE NATURE CONSERVATION CONTEXT

5.1 The principal features of nature conservation interest in the district are succinctly described in one of MDC's own documents (MDC 1994). The council's *Biodiversity Action Plan* (MDC 1995) describes the district's biodiversity in some depth. Figure 3 shows the SSSIs and High Biodiversity Areas. The purpose of this chapter is to describe in general terms the contribution that the range of habitats across the district makes to the character of the landscape and individual character areas in particular. This is done under the heading of the principal habitats present.

### 5.2 Woodland

5.2.1 A substantial proportion of the woods in the district are ancient and semi-natural or plantations on ancient woodland sites. These are the major woodland contribution to the landscape. There is frequent woodland on the Central Mendip Hills slopes with outstanding woodlands SSSIs at Ebbor Gorge and Stoke Woods and woodland contributes significantly to the great visual variety of these slopes. In East Mendip, many of the ancient woodland lie in the steep valleys. They contribute to local character rather than wide views across the landscape, but the Asham Wood complex, a SSSI of very high nature conservation interest, is visually prominent. The complex geology of East Mendip gives rise to great variety within some of these woodlands.

5.2.2 There are few large woodlands in the Cotswold Edge and the Lower Frome Valley except where they form a large chain of woodland from Hardington Wood through Buckland Wood and Orchardleigh Wood to the substantial treecover within Orchardleigh Park. However, in the Upper Frome Valley woodlands are a prominent feature of the steep slopes of the Greensand scarp, notably a number of plantations on ancient woodland sites. To the west there are several large woodlands on the Oolite slopes, of which Postlebury SSSI is the largest. In the transition from the edge of East Mendip to the Batcombe Downs and Valleys there are large woodlands in the slopes of moderate gradient, but in the Lias Lowlands large woodland is largely absent. It is, however, a major contributor to the character of the Polden Ridge, which has several woodlands of high nature conservation value.

5.2.3 With some exceptions that include twentieth century conifer plantations on the Mendip Hills, woodlands planted within landscape parks, and deciduous plantations in the north west corner of the area on the edge of the Mendip Hills, secondary woodlands are small and their contribution to landscape character is more akin to that of copses and hedgerow trees.

### 5.3 Grassland

5.3.1 Most of the grassland within the district has been improved for agriculture, but there are significant areas of unimproved or semi-improved grassland which make substantial contributions to landscape character. The two major areas of unimproved neutral grassland,

Yoxter Range and Chancellors Farm on Central Mendip and Westbury Moor are a strong contrast to the uniform grassland textures that surround them. Elsewhere the neutral grasslands are much smaller in area but make local contributions to landscape character, such as the floors and streamside of the East Mendip Valleys.

- 5.3.2 Unimproved calcareous grassland is found mainly on the southern slopes of Central Mendip Hills mainly as a survivor of the former open sheepwalks. It is one of the dominant features of the High Biodiversity Area along these slopes. The varied textures and patterns of the grassland are integral to the landscape character of these areas.

#### **5.4 Heathland and Limestone Heath**

- 5.4.1 The major areas of heathland in the district are at Black Down and near Priddy. It contributes to a very varied topographical and vegetation pattern which stands out from the broad sweep of the plateau, and the High Biodiversity Area centred on the Down corresponds to a very varied landscape.
- 5.4.2 There is a small amount of lowland heath at Meare Heath and Street Heath, while limestone heath is found where deeper soils over the limestone have weathered to become acidic.

#### **5.5 Wetland**

- 5.5.1 Apart from the Priddy Pools on Central Mendip and Emborough Pool in East Mendip, the major wetland sites are on the Moors, principally with the Westhay Heath and Westhay Moors SSSIs. They are part of the 'wild' landscape of the areas actively managed for nature conservation, in contrast to the surrounding land uses of grazing and peat extraction.

#### **5.6 Farmland**

- 5.6.1 Most of the district is farmland, and apart from fragments of unimproved grassland and wetland, the principal nature conservation interest of the farmland lies in the hedgerows, copses and small fragments of unfarmed land. The hedges are generally of mixed species composition. Only those of recent origin are dominated by a few species like hawthorn and blackthorn, although in some areas hazel appears to be the principal component of hedges which are probably quite old. This general variety of hedgerow species is a significant contribution to the landscape, particularly where the hedges are overgrown and flowers, fruit and leaf colour changes can be seen at some distance. Many of the soils in the district are calcareous and the range of species present reflects this. But while variations in trees and hedgerows shrubs and different geologies make some contribution to variations in landscape character, that its a subtlety beyond this assessment.