AYLESBEARE COMMON RSPB

2017-26: Confirmed Priority Site of National Importance

Lowland heath with a range of ponds and acidic and base-rich mires, holding a breeding populations of Southern and Small Red Damselflies; Hairy Dragonfly has bred.

Last updated 17/12/25

Site: AYLESBEARE COMMON RSPB	1987-1996			1997-2006			2007-2016			2017-2026		
Grid ref.: SY053906	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other	Breeding		Other
	Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss		Succ	Poss	
Damselflies												
Beautiful Demoiselle		+	+						B			B
Banded Demoiselle									A			
Emerald Damselfly		B	D	A		B	B	B	D	C	B	D
White-legged Damselfly												
Large Red Damselfly	B	C	D	C	C	D		A	D	B	B	C
Blue-tailed Damselfly		+	C	B	+	B			C			C
Scarce Blue-t Damselfly												
Common Blue Damselfly		+	D		C	D			D	A	A	D
Southern Damselfly	**A**	**C**	**D**	**B**	**D**	**E**	**D**	**D**	**E**	**A**	**C**	**E**
Azure Damselfly	B	C	E	D	D	E	B	B	D	C	C	E
Red-eyed Damselfly												
Small Red-eyed Damselfly												A
Small Red Damselfly						**B**	**A**		**B**		**A**	**C**
Dragonflies												
Hairy Dragonfly					**A**	**C**			**A**			**A**
Common Hawker		+	+						B			
Norfolk Hawker												
Brown Hawker												
Southern Hawker	D	A	B						B	A		B
Migrant Hawker			A						B			B
Emperor Dragonfly	B	A	C	A	A	B	B		C	B		C
Lesser Emperor									A			
Vagrant Emperor												
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	A	+	B			B	A		B		A	C
Downy Emerald												
Broad-bodied Chaser		+	B			B	+	B	C			B
Scarce Chaser												
Four-spotted Chaser			A	A	B	C		A	B		A	B
Keeled Skimmer	B	D	E	D	D	E	C	C	D		A	D
Black-tailed Skimmer			B			B			C			C
Common Darter	B	B	D			A	D		D		A	D
Red-veined Darter						A						A
Ruddy Darter						**A**						
Black Darter						A						
Yellow-winged Darter												
Scarlet Darter												
Total species in category:	8	14	17	8	9	18	9	7	21	7	10	20

Bold underlined = nationally important species **Bold black = important species**

Succ = Successful breeding (exuvia(e) and/or larva(e) and/or pre-flight emergent and/or oviposition);
Poss = Possible breeding (copulating pair); Other = Adult(s) or unspecified.
Abundance codes: A=1; B=2-5; C=6-20; D=21-100; E=101-500; F=>500; + = no count.

Key Species History

Southern Damselfly - low numbers recorded intermittently from 1956 with no more than four during 1977-90, except for 12 in 1986; following grazing and other appropriate management, increased to 45 on 30/6/95 (further details in Kerry 1991 and 1994), 87 on 8/7/97, 117 on 8/7/99, 326 on 22/6/01, 132 on 8/7/05, 134 on 24/6/06, 145 on 7/7/07 (when the colony was expanding into mire burnt two years earlier) and 204 on 30/6/08; peak numbers have been 15-198 since. Annual maxima:

91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08
4	5	18	8	45	31	87	29	117	79	326	95	103	?	132	134	145	204

09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
53	162	163	59	57	15	198	173	115	163	98	66	103	108	104	150		

Small Red Damselfly – a single in bomb holes in 1978 (but recorded previous to that in 1956 and 1965); small numbers (B) in 2006-7, with 1 egg-laying on 7/7/07; and in 2021-23, with copulation in 2021; about 10 seen in 2024; 19, including a coupled pair, on 28/6/25.
Hairy Dragonfly – singles recorded in 1985 and 1993 on 'top' pond; C on 29/5/01, including a mating pair, and small numbers (A-B) seen since 2005.
Ruddy Darter – reported on 19/8/00 and 3/8/03.

Other species of note

Common Hawker – reported in 1977, copulating in 1994 and 1996; A-B in 2010-2016, but not since.
Lesser Emperor – 1 on 8/8/10.
Keeled Skimmer – abundant throughout, breeding in all suitable runnels and pools.
Black Darter – 1 on 8/9/99.
Red-veined Darter – singles on 24/6/02 and 18/9/19.

Habitat

Lowland heath with a range of mire and pond habitats (further details in Kerry, 1994):

1. Three square fire ponds dug December 1988 (*p*H 5.4-5.9, conductivity 70-120 μS/cm in 1995):
   - 'SH pond' - *ca*. 2m deep with scrubby island; bare soil and pebbles around edge, some rushes. Deep, muddy water, no floating, emergent or submerged vegetation. Tussock *Molinia*, scrub and bramble to east and south, open wet heath to north and west.
   - 'Butterfly pond' - *ca*. 2m deep, emergent and floating vegetation.
   - 'Bottom pond' - shallower *ca*. 1m, dry later. Little vegetation.
2. 'Andy's pond' - dug during summer 1983. Emergent vegetation around edge and 75% cover floating vegetation. Small willows to south and bare bank to north. *p*H 5.8, conductivity 240 μS/cm. in 1995.
3. 'Toby's pond', dug 1997. Some bog pondweed and emergents (5%). Banks with *Molinia*, cotton grass and wet heath/mire vegetation. Mostly deep open peaty water.
4. Five ponds (2 dug in 1997, one above and one below the original 3 ponds):
   - Highest pond 1. Surrounded by scrub, gorse, brambles, willows and birch. 95% emergent vegetation, with very little open water. Large dead pine tree standing in middle of pond.
   - Pond 2. Abundant bogbean with frequent emergents (bulrush, bur reed and rushes) and occasional bog pondweed with very little open water. Willow scrub on island. The pond is surrounded by willows, birches, brambles and gorse on three sides, with slightly lower scrub to the south.
   - Pond 3. Emergent bur reed dominates this pond, with a very little open water with marsh St John's wort and bog pondweed to the south of the board walk. The pond is surrounded by willow, birch, brambles and gorse.

- Pond 4. Again this pond is surrounded by scrub. Emergents are frequent around the edge and there is about 30% floating bog pondweed, about half the pond is deep open water.
- Pond 5. The lowest pond, filled during May 1995 (when *p*H 6.9-7.2, conductivity 170 μS/cm), has birch, willow and gorse scrub to the east and west and open heath/mire to the north and south. Emergent bulrush and bur reed are frequent as is floating bog pondweed and other floating species. About half the pond is deep open water. The substrate here is clay.

5. Southern Damselfly area: Black Bog-rush *Schoenus nigricans* mire with runnels and pools flowing south to main stream. Cattle grazed since 1991 at 50-70 cattle-days/ha during May-October (*i.e.* each hectare received the equivalent of one cow for 50-70 days). *p*H 6.8-7.4 (7/8/91); 6.9-7.5 (16/7/93); 7.0-7.6 (12/8/95). Conductivity 230-270 μS/cm. (14/6/95). Since 1995, light summer cattle grazing has continued. Suitable area has been extended eastwards, where the first Southern Damselflies were seen in early July, 2007 (six males and one female).
6. Enclosure pool. Gorse to the north and west, open to the south and east. Abundant emergent and floating vegetation.
7. Two bomb holes which are very overgrown with willows, some shallow water and *Sphagnum* species, drying later.
8. Cattle drinking pool in basin mire –dry in summer (not visited in 2005).

Status ***Area***
SAC; SPA; SSSI; RSPB Reserve. 215.7 ha

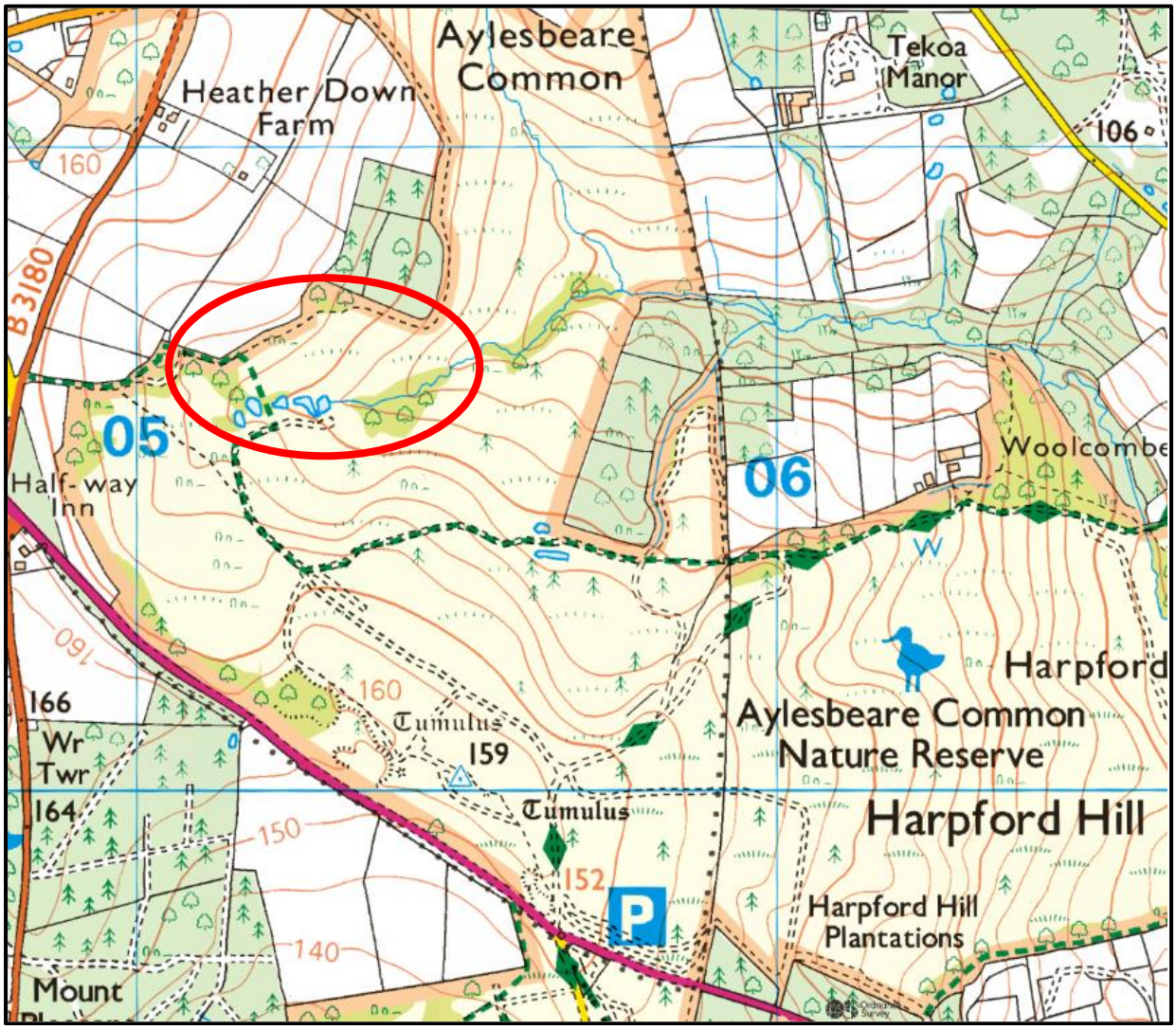
Local Authority*:* East Devon DC

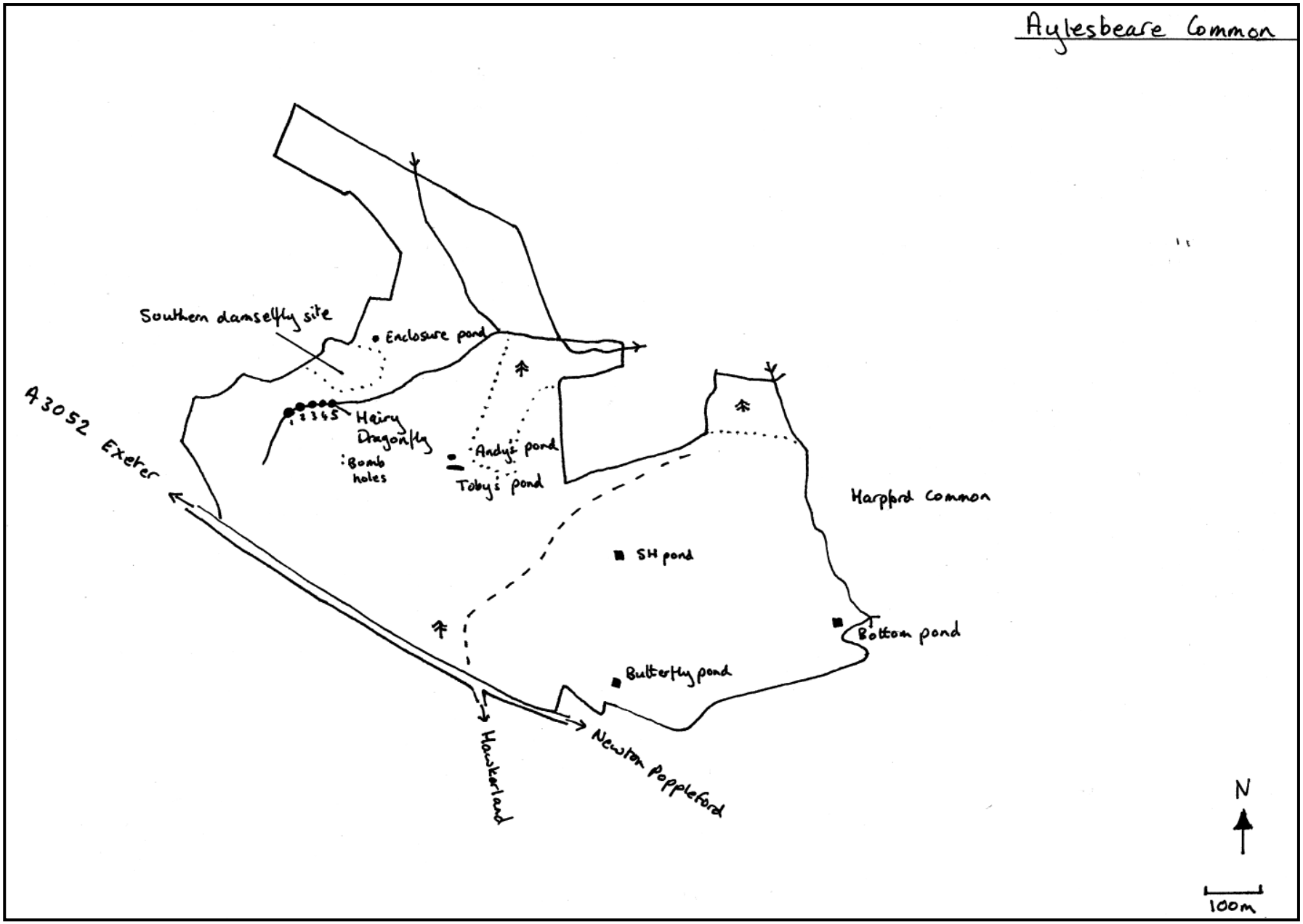
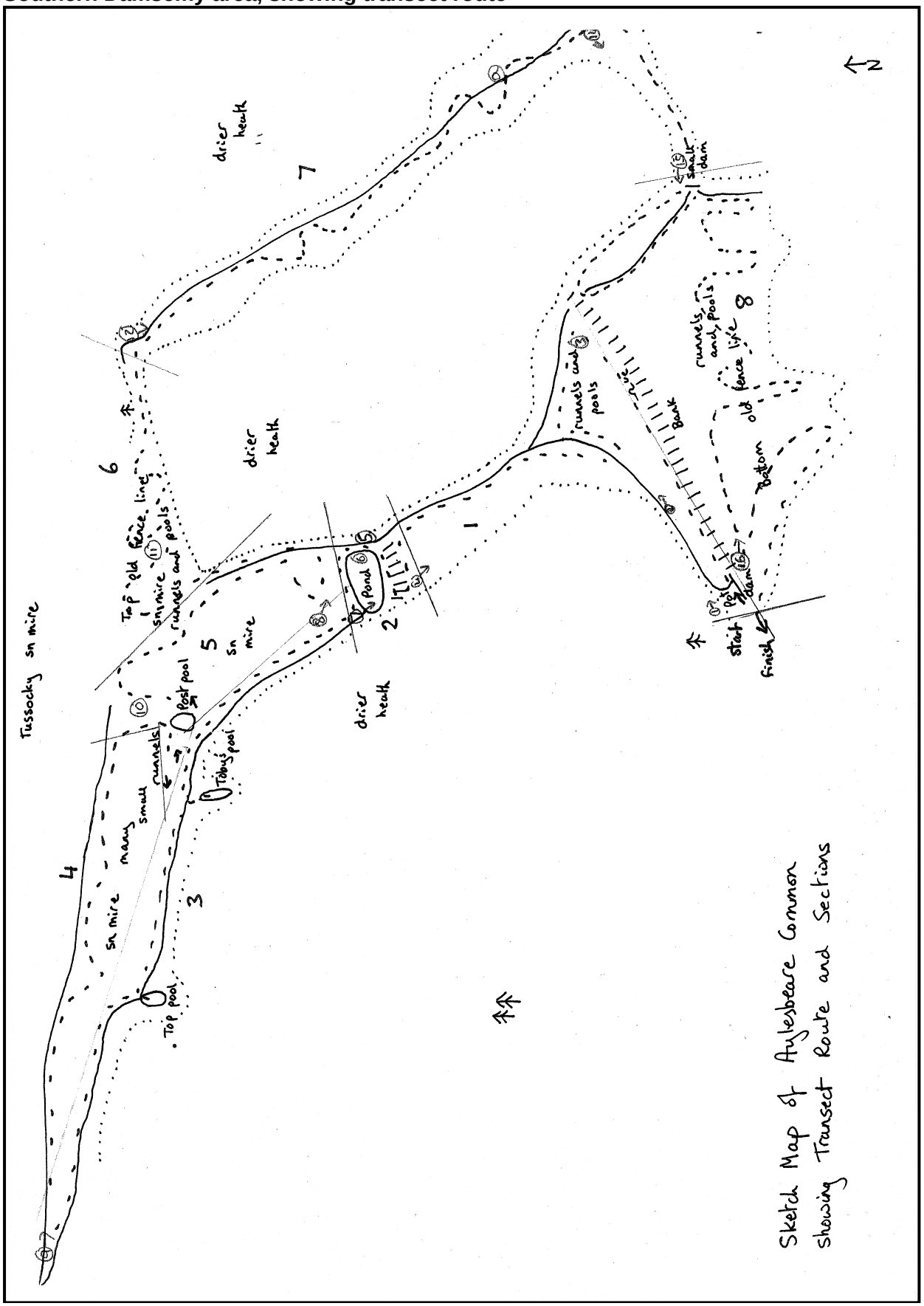
Owner/tenant
Clinton Devon Estates, leased to RSPB.

Threats
- Accidental fire.
- Natural succession.

Management suggestions
- Continue grazing and extending *Schoenus* area for Southern Damselfly.
- Dig out bomb holes to make shallow pools.
- Re-profile 'fire ponds' to give shallower sides.

Aylesbeare Common: main area of dragonfly interest within red oval




Aylesbeare Common
Southern damselfly site
Enclosure pond
A3052 Exeter
1 2 3 4 5
Hairy Dragonfly
Bomb holes
Andy's pond
Toby's pond
Harpford Common
SH pond
Bottom pond
Butterfly pond
Hawkerland
Newton Poppleford
N
100m

Southern Damselfly area, showing transect route