



Hedgerows and verges in Herefordshire

Hedgerows and verges border most of the roads and lanes we travel on in Herefordshire; when they flourish, full of flowers and leaves, we can see how much they contribute to our surroundings. But did you know what a vital role they play in our natural environment, that they are important havens for a great variety of wildlife, and also capture and reduce the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere? If our hedgerows and verges are to continue providing us with these benefits, we need to protect and sustain them for our present well-being and our future existence.

Hedgerows

Hedgerows pattern our Herefordshire landscape. Some are relatively new but many are ancient and mark the boundaries of parishes, estates and fields. They are part of the history of our land, and indicate where places are, and have been settled, used, and travelled through.

Their seasonal changes of leaves, colours, flowers and fruit provide us with clear signals of the annual life cycle and the passage of time. They form green corridors joining areas of vegetation that allow many insects and small mammals to move safely.

What is a Hedgerow?

A hedgerow is any boundary or line of trees or bushes that is over 20m long and less than 5m at its base, provided that at one time the trees or shrubs were continuous; they range from being tall, thick and impenetrable to short, thin and gappy. They can contain a wide variety of woody species or very few.

Wildlife in hedgerows

Hedgerows form habitats for wildlife and act as roads enabling movement and also providing shelter, shade and food. Established hedgerows are critically important for the survival of many farmland and woodland plants, birds and mammals that used to thrive in English pastureland and woodlands but, tragically, have disappeared or declined rapidly since the 1940s.

You will see isolated trees poking up out of a hedgerow. These provide a different type of habitat from the bushes, and thus attract different life forms; owls, for example, nest in trees whereas smaller birds use the protection of the denser, lower hedge for food and nesting sites.

Supporting wildlife

Mature hedgerow plants can feed their inhabitants with pollen, seeds, nuts, fruit, nectar, certain leaves and sap. Sometimes less visible are many types of fungi, mosses, liverworts, lichens and galls that are all food for small animals.

Foxes, rabbits, badgers, hedgehogs, weasels, dormice, frogs and lizards can live in the bottoms of the hedges, as can insects, bees, butterflies, moths, beetles and flies. Insects are our native pollinators and are crucial for farm crops that we eat.

Hedge bottoms tend to be damper and shadier than the surrounding open ground so offer shelter from the extremes of weather; foxgloves, bluebells, arums can flourish in them.



Protectors

Field hedges with thick bottoms offer shade and wind breaks for farm stock.

Hedgerows absorb water and because of their bulk and root systems can act as buffers against soil erosion and flooding from water run-off from adjoining ground.

Changes with the seasons

Some woody hedgerow plants, such as hawthorn and blackthorn, blossom exuberantly, heralding spring and, if left uncut until late autumn, then display patches of red haws and dark blue sloes. Other woody plants with less showy blossoms such as guelder rose, dogwood and hazel offer fruit and nuts.

Climbing plants, like dog roses, brambles, bryony and honeysuckle, use hedges for support scrambling up and over them; they too produce pollen, fruit, berries and seeds.

If these rich habitats are to survive, hedgerow plants need to be able to complete a seasonal cycle, at least in some years. If they are always cut before or during flowering, pollinating insects will have no food and pollen won't reach the farm crops that produce the food we rely on. Cutting early will deplete a hedgerow of fruit or nuts needed by birds and other wild animals. If hedgerows are cut while fruiting, seeds are unlikely to ripen so new seedlings will not appear.

Hedgerow plants that get through an annual cycle of growth and production can maintain food and shelter for a rich diversity of wildlife. If we lose that diversity, farm crops suffer, especially orchards and cereals, as does much other plant life.

Looking after hedgerows

The ways we manage hedgerows determine their structure and their longevity. If left unmanaged most woody species will grow into trees and may also spread outwards, becoming very wide. Some species grow tall and leggy, leaving gaps in the hedge that then need to be fenced or in-filled with new plants. The overgrown older ones are cut down to almost ground level (coppiced) to encourage new shoots.

While trees are important habitats for some birds and animals, dense well-managed hedges provide a wider variety of habitats with more accessible food. They are effective boundaries for retaining livestock and, unlike barbed wire fencing, provide large and small animals with shade and shelter.

A healthy, flourishing hedgerow can filter out harmful pollution from road traffic. They help to reduce run-off from ploughed fields thus retaining the water for the planted crops, stem the flow of mud and floods onto roads, and make it less likely that nearby water courses will silt up.

Cutting and Trimming

Hedges surrounding farmed fields and bordering roads are commonly cut annually in Herefordshire to avoid obstructing the highway. The time of year when this is done can significantly affect the life cycle of the hedgerow and the animals that live in it.



The Hedgerow Regulations (1997) prohibit cutting or trimming between 1 March and 31 August. Although that protects the hedgerows during most of the bird-nesting season it does not safeguard hedgerow plants for their full seasonal cycle of growth and fruiting. If cutting is left until after autumn we can see an abundance of fruits such as hips and berries as well as nuts and seeds - all important food supplies. So ideally, hedgerows should be cut between the end of November and early February and only once every three years, unless there are issues of safety on a roadside. Such a regime gives hedgerow plants a better chance to flourish and for many animals the benefit of well-stocked larders.

Trimming. Mechanical-flail trimmers can be effective as long as they are used only to cut twigs of up to 2 cm girth. If used on thicker woody stems these are split and become vulnerable to diseases. Such aggressive treatment, used repeatedly, can cause plants to die.

Cutting to differing heights each time can encourage denser, bushier growth and avoids empty gaps developing at the bottom.

Hedge laying. In the past, hedgerows had to be managed by laying the hedge with hand tools. This is an ancient craft with many regional styles. A well-laid hedge will show vigorous new growth from the base and, if kept trimmed in subsequent years, will become a thick, impenetrable barrier against sheep, cattle or horses, a wind break and water absorber, as well as an ideal home for many living organisms.

Hedge laying

Hedges need to be at least five years old for laying.

Within the UK, more than thirty different styles of hedge laying have evolved over many years to cope with variations in area climates, farming practices and woody plants suited to local conditions.

The basic feature of all styles is to pleach, to cut almost completely through the main stem(s) of the bushes and then lay them at an angle close to the ground.

Midland Bullock is a style found fairly widely in the West Midlands where farms with large animals need hedges that can withstand the weight of cattle and horses pushing against them. 4-5 foot stakes are driven into the ground, 18 inches apart, behind the stem line of the bushes towards the brush (bushy) side of the hedge; flexible hazel wood binders are then woven along the top to give stability and strength. Livestock would be in the field behind the brush side while an arable crop might be on the other. The bushes regenerate from the bottom and form a dense barrier that sheep cannot push through.

Coppicing. Planned coppicing of a hedge, especially when it has become overgrown and gappy, is a method of restoration that encourages new growth. With long hedges the best practice is to coppice (cutting the stems to ground level) some sections of the hedge in any one year and other sections in successive years.



Damage to Hedgerows

Removal. Landowners or property developers often want to remove legally protected hedges; to do so they must make a planning application to Herefordshire Council. In addition to the protective Hedgerow Regulations (1997) (enforced in Herefordshire by the Planning Authority) some hedgerow trees may be protected by specific Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs). Where there is a TPO, consent is required for any type of treatment to the trees whether topping, lopping, pollarding or removal.

Destructive practice. Some developers put nets over hedgerows to prevent birds nesting; this is a deplorable attempt to bypass the Hedgerow Regulations and many people argue should be subject to legally enforceable deterrents.

Replacement. People wanting to remove legally protected hedges often say that they will replace them by planting others elsewhere on the property so as to mitigate any loss of biodiversity. Such proposals ignore the fact that protected hedgerows have matured through many decades and become established ecosystems that cannot be replaced or replicated — they will be lost.

Hedgerow Regulations (1997) for England give legal protection to countryside hedgerows. **Note:** They do not apply to garden hedges.

They are protected if they are **important**, that is, at least 30 years old **AND** satisfy **one or more** of the following:

- Mark all or part of a parish boundary that existed before 1850
- Contain recorded archaeological features
- Are completely or partly next to an archaeological site
- Mark the boundary of an estate that existed before 1600
- Are part of a field system, or look to be associated with any feature associated with the field system that existed before 1845
- Contain protected species (animals, birds, plants)
- Contain species that are recorded as vulnerable, endangered or rare
- Contain woody species as specified in schedule1, Part11 of the Regulations



Verges

Verges line most roads, often alongside hedgerows, and are usually full of grass, with varying amounts of other vegetation. We are all aware of verges but don't realise their importance as habitats for a great variety of wildlife. Mammals such as hedgehogs, dormice and voles, amphibia such as frogs, as well as insects – bees, butterflies, moths, beetles, flies and gnats are found in verges. When they are topped by hedgerows the two complement each other in providing a very wide range of habitats. When managed sensitively verges can enhance the environment, biodiversity, and the mood of passing road users.



Linear meadows, or scruffy strips?

The vegetation of verges can be very diverse reservoirs of both spectacular and less obvious wild flowers. Over 700 species of wild flowers (nearly 45% of our national flora) grow on verges. So, they should be cared for in ways that will help them to be plant-rich, not filled only by the widespread cow parsley, buttercups, nettles and rank grass, but also for rarer species such as orchids, campions, bluebells and primroses. Encouraging biodiversity ensures that bees, wasps, and butterflies and moths are attracted to them; without pollinators, plants of all kinds will eventually disappear.

During the last one hundred years we have lost 97% our wildflower-rich farmland meadows in England. Plant-rich verges are now the places where we can find many of those lost meadow species; they deserve to be cared for as sanctuaries.

Threats. Verges on busy roads are sprayed by mud, exposed to engine fumes and contaminated with litter. Some plants and animals are able to withstand such onslaughts better than others but the result is a much narrower range of diversity. What is even more damaging and denuding is frequent and aggressive cutting, or close mowing that jeopardises even the more robust species. It prevents flowers blooming and seeds setting resulting in the eradication of most plants except grass. As a result we lose much insect and other animal life.

Chemical weed killer sprays are sometimes sprayed on verges but also kill insects; the practice should be as limited as possible.

Maintain and Sustain. Safety for road users is a priority so some judicious cutting of verges is necessary where sight-lines are affected. But generally they should not be cut until after plants have flowered and seeds have set; only if it is essential for safety should there be a second cut towards the end of the year. Where verges are broad, just a metre wide strip alongside the road needs to be cut. After cutting the dead



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material should be removed otherwise a thatch builds up and smothers the smaller wild flowers so that only the more robust grass species and plants prosper.

Sensitive management can encourage a display of wildflowers and a diversity of plants, providing a linear meadow that is a delight for road users and a corridor for many other creatures.

Regulations prohibit hedge-cutting between 1 March and 31 of August each year, a period that covers most of the bird-nesting season but there are no such regulations for verges, although some councils and road maintenance companies have introduced their own restrictions; we really need national legislation aimed at conserving and restoring roadside verges. Their importance as ecosystems, part of the natural world on which we are dependent, should be recognised with regulations that will ensure good management.

Finally

In 2019 the UK's Committee on Climate Change suggested that the national hedgerow network should be extended by 40% as a contribution to the 2050 net-zero emissions target.

Natural England has recommended that the increase should be 60% to support our biodiversity.

Herefordshire CPRE hopes this guide will encourage everyone who loves the Herefordshire countryside to share our aims to conserve and care for our many hedgerows and verges in ways that will support the abundant life that depends on them to the benefit of us all.