



HABITATS

Examples from left to right: Annie Spratt, Annie Spratt

Hedgerows

Information: Richard Thornbury

All about hedgerows

- Hedges are one of the most important habitats in the UK. In many landscapes they are the only semi-natural habitat and a refuge for a host of wildlife. A well-managed hedge will provide thick, dense cover for nesting birds, leaves for many species of moth and other insects, flowers full of nectar and a profusion of fruit for all to feast on.
- The rotational nature of good management provides a succession of different habitats and structural diversity, adding to their value. The plants growing around the base represent a good example of this as they develop, from post disturbance pioneers such as primroses, through tall herb communities of foxglove, hedge woundwort etc, to low scrub, each hosting its own suite of species. This kind of dynamic succession is often missing from current management.
- In addition to their value as homes for a wide variety of species, hedgerows are also important corridors of movement, providing essential connectivity between otherwise fragmented and isolated habitats. This is increasingly imperative in the face of the unknown impacts of worsening climate change, as hedgerows can be a way for species to move from no longer favourable areas to more suitable ones.
- Hedges provide a range of further ecosystem services; they are excellent at intercepting surface water from high rainfall events, helping it get into the ground whilst retaining run-off. This will become increasingly frequent as the climate continues to change. In addition hedges act as windbreaks and they are ideal for carbon capture as the young vigorous growth of the trees, absorb a lot of carbon which if laid, is retained in living stems.

Fauna: Mammals: includes hedgehogs, dormice, bats. Birds: about 30 species nest in hedges and 80% of our woodland birds use hedges in some way. Look out for bullfinch, dunnock, whitethroat, yellowhammer. Amphibians and reptiles: including common toad, grass snake, slow worm.

Invertebrates Hedges support a rich invertebrate **fauna** including 20 butterfly species such as both brown and white-letter hairstreak. Many beetle larvae are in decaying coppice stools, hundreds of moth species feed on the leaves and a host of other insects call hedgerows home, too many to list!

Hedgerow management

- The aim of management is to create a thick hedge that is dense at the base with lots of flowers and fruit. These dynamic processes provide a succession of different habitats and structural diversity which is of great value to wildlife. The best way to achieve this is by not over managing!
- Most hedging plants flower and fruit best on growth that is 2–4 years old. If hedges are trimmed every year they never have a chance to provide this banquet. Hedges should be trimmed no more than necessary to maintain their dense growth, for example, at least on a 2 or 3 year rotation. The longer you can leave between trimmings, the better for fruit and flower production.
- Trimming to the same height every cut will cause a hedge to become increasingly leggy and gappy as it loses its lower branches and eventually whole plants, significantly compromising its wildlife value. To avoid this, the point of trimming should be slightly higher and wider at each cut.
- Eventually the whole hedge will begin to become either too big or too sparse. It will need to be reset by laying. This is where the stems of the plants are cut almost all of the way through, leaving only a thin hinge, and then bent over to re-establish dense growth from ground level from the bent stems which continue to live and grow.
- The hedges on a holding should all be managed on a rotational basis so there are always a range of different hedges at different stages in the management cycle, providing different ecological niches. It is very important that not all hedges are cut at the same time. Only a small proportion should be managed in any given year. If possible try to coordinate with neighbouring land managers to develop a landscape scale approach to rotational hedgerow management.
- Allow trees to grow on as standards (fully grown trees) at regular intervals along the hedge. These should be more than 20 m (to allow for good crown development) but less than 100 m (to provide suitable corridors of movement for bats and birds).
- Hedge margins should be wide herb-rich strips with little intervention beyond the disturbance caused by the hedge management cycle. If scrub starts to take over, it can be cut back on a rotational basis along with hedge trimming. Where livestock graze, fences should be set away from the hedge and where crops (arable or forage) are harvested, a good margin of land should be spared from the machines. This will provide excellent corridors of movement for a range of species including toads and hedgehogs, nesting sites for ground nesting birds, and many species of grass-feeding insects.
- Don't be too tidy- retain dead wood around the base of the hedge where possible and don't tidy fallen leaves; both represent important habitat features.

DID YOU KNOW? Hedges have been part of our landscape since at least the Bronze Age!

Our word for hedge comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "haeg" meaning an enclosure!

Between 1950 and 2007 Britain lost over 50% of its hedgerows, about 500,000 km!

Hedgerows support 30% of UK butterfly species and 50% of our mammals!

Funding is available for planting hedges and hedgerow trees, far less frequent cutting and for hedge laying, under the Government's Countryside Stewardship Scheme!

How can we help?

- The two most important things we can do to help hedgerow habitats is to plant more hedges and to manage those we have effectively.
- Planting new hedges– land managers should try to identify isolated habitats that would benefit from increased connectivity. These could be pockets of woodland, ponds or areas of wildflowers which can easily be identified on a map or aerial photograph. Consideration should be given to sites of former hedgerows and the role the hedge could play in intercepting surface water, soil erosion and runoff (planting along a contour, parallel to a water course, around slurry stores or livestock housing, are all good examples of this).
- A mixture of native hardwood trees that can be managed by laying, should be selected. Be guided by what grows well in the locality; good general choices include hazel, blackthorn, hawthorn, gelder rose, spindle, wayfaring tree. If planting around a field used by livestock, take care to avoid poisonous species such as yew. Include trees to be grown on as standards every 20–100 m to maximise the hedge's value as a corridor, particularly for bats and birds, for example marsh tits.
- Control competitive weeds during the first growing season by mulching. The hedge can be trimmed in the first couple of years to encourage bushy growth, allowing the hedge to become taller and wider at each cut before being left to grow on for laying.

Learn more

- hedgeline.org.uk
- ptes.org/hedgerow/
- gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants
- Book: A Natural History of the Hedgerow, J. Wright. London: Profile Books, 2016.
- Book: Ancient Trees, Living Landscapes, R. Muir, Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited. 2005.
- Book: Hedging: A Practical Conservation Handbook, A. Brooks and E. Agate, Wallingford: British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. 1975.
- Contact an A Rocha UK naturalist at naturalist@arocha.org