

# Hedgerow management



**Above:** The wildlife value of a hedge is affected by its structure and the timing of its management.

**Good hedgerow management improves the habitat for a wide range of insects, birds and mammals, and increases the food available for many species. The management of field margins next to the hedge is also critical for a wide range of species.**

## BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

### **A variety of boundary types provides habitat for a diversity of wildlife**

Maintaining different types of field boundaries provides for lots of species. Grey partridges and yellowhammers prefer short hedgerows (under 2 metres) with grass margins. Bullfinches prefer wide hedgerows over 4 m tall. Many hole-nesting birds such as tree sparrows use old hedgerow trees. Corn buntings and skylarks prefer to feed in open landscapes, so you could keep boundaries without hedges for them. Corn buntings use mature hedges in winter especially when combined with wild bird cover. Dense

hedges may also provide important winter roosts. Ditches with rank vegetation also provide nest sites for yellowhammers and reed buntings.

### **A dense base protects nesting birds**

Thick, dense cover at the base of hedges provides safer nesting places and reduces predation.

### **Hedges offer food, cover and shelter to wildlife**

Hedges can provide early pollen for bees, habitat for butterflies, and overwintering environments for many invertebrates, birds and

mammals. They are a source of food, shelter and cover for many species. A good mixture of native hedge plants can provide seeds and berries throughout winter.

### **Old hedgerow trees are a rich wildlife feature**

Mature, dead and dying trees are home to a variety of insects and other animals that may be found nowhere else on a farm. Because of their importance, such trees require protection and a long-term plan to maintain age diversity through successive planting.

## HOW CAN I RESTORE AND MANAGE HEDGEROWS?

### Hedge trimming

- Trim in January or February to avoid destroying birds' nests and to allow birds to eat early winter berries (Sept to Dec).
- Trim 30–50% of the hedge on a two- or three-year rotation. This ensures there is nesting cover somewhere on the land every year, and boosts the berry crops (found mainly on second-year growth). Rotational trimming saves time and money.
- Agri-environment schemes, area designations and Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) can impose restrictions on hedge management. Consult SGRPID for current advice.
- If soil or crop conditions require an autumn trimming regime, it is even more important that this should be done on a two- or three-year rotation. Avoid trimming all hedges in the same year.
- Consider allowing small hedges to grow out gradually by leaving an additional few centimetres in height and width at each cut.

### Long-term management by laying or coppicing

- Occasional restoration work to prevent gaps developing or hedges turning into lines of trees can be performed in winter by:
  - coppicing (cutting the stems at ground level) is best where the hedge is too overgrown and thick-stemmed to be laid
  - laying (cutting stems part way through and interweaving them along the hedgeline) has a less drastic effect on wildlife and the landscape, but requires skilled labour.

- Both coppicing and laying reduce nesting opportunities for birds in the few years immediately after management and should therefore be carried out on a long rotation. This ensures nesting habitat each spring.

### Planting up gappy hedges

- Use species native to your local area.
- Undertake planting in winter, providing the ground is not frozen. The best time is early winter when the ground is warmer and more moist.
- Planting up gaps can be done when coppicing existing plants if these lack a thick base. This will give the new plants minimum competition.
- Before planting, clear the ground of vegetation, using glyphosate or by planting through black polythene or a straw mulch to suppress weeds and reduce moisture loss.
- Plastic tubes, spirals or quills may be needed to protect young plants from rabbits or deer.

### Protection from field management practices

- Nesting birds need a thick hedge base. To maintain this, avoid spray drift, over-zealous trimming, ploughing too close to the hedge and heavy grazing.
- All arable hedgerows should have a grass strip at least one-metre wide between the hedge bank and the crop. Wider margins can be funded by Rural Development Contracts and are particularly important for nesting birds such as corn buntings, yellowhammers and whitethroats.

They act as a buffer against spray drift. Damage to roots by stock or machinery can be prevented by fencing.

### Maintaining hedgerow trees

- Where there are hedgerow trees, plan for a succession of mature trees by allowing saplings of native species to be left untouched during trimming.
- Retain old, dying and dead trees where they're not a hazard, as they support insects and hole-nesting birds.
- Where a hedge includes several hedgerow trees, establish buffer strips at least 6 m wide on either side of the hedge, where possible, to protect the roots from damage.

### Whin and broom

- In many areas of Scotland, whin (gorse), broom and juniper are common. Areas range in size from thick hedge banks and small field corners to large expanses. This scrub is a significant breeding habitat for some farmland birds of conservation concern such as linnets, song thrushes and yellowhammers.
- Broom regenerates well and seeds that have lain dormant germinate once ground has been opened up again.
- Broom can live for 18 years but often dies out after ten from cattle trampling.
- Broom rarely regenerates from woody stems and is often cleared by cutting, burning and grazing on field margins or moorland edges. Some form of rotational cutting seems to favour regeneration.

## KEY POINTS

- The main aim of hedgerow management should be to maintain a range of different types and sizes of hedgerow, to support a wide variety of wildlife.
- A hedgerow with a continuous, dense base beside a permanent grass margin provides the best cover for nesting birds.
- Avoid trimming during the peak nesting season (March to August) and trim on a two or three-year rotation.
- Consider the impacts on landscape character and species of open farmland (e.g. skylarks and lapwings) before planting new hedges across open landscapes.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Arable field margins
- Buffer strips on grassland

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info)

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK charity that speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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