



Hedgerows

Priority habitat

General information

The UK has 400,000km of managed hedgerows providing habitat for a wide range of species. One study found a total 2070 species in one hedge - and this is assumed to be an underestimate - demonstrating the potential species richness of our hedge network. However, less than 48% of our hedges are in good structural condition, and that figure drops to 31% when margin management is included. Hedge condition varies regionally, CEH provides regional data to check the state of hedges in your local authority.

Some of our most vulnerable mammal species, including hedgehogs and dormice, hibernate in hedgerows. Farmland birds, which have seen one of the most dramatic declines in the recent State of Nature report (63% decline since 1970), need hedgerows more than ever with 84% relying on hedgerows.

While these figures are concerning, we like to consider this an opportunity for improvement. We have an extensive network of habitat for wildlife that with the return to appropriate management can provide homes, food and connectivity across the landscape.

Habitat threats

Lack of lifecycle management - Hedgerows are a man-shaped habitat and require management to ensure their characteristic structures. When maintained within the 'goldilocks' zone of maturity, they create not only a habitat of extraordinary wildlife value, but also a [landscape feature from which we greatly benefit](#).

Hedgerows are a successional habitat, best managed according to their inherent lifecycle. Regardless of how you routinely manage them they will continue to mature, and will all need periodic rejuvenation (such as hedge laying or coppicing). Rejuvenation re-sets the habitat succession, thickens a hedge back up from the base and provides each hedge with another potential life-span. Periodic rejuvenation allows hedgerows to be a permanent feature in the countryside, and without it, we see hedgerows structurally decline and lost.

Depending on how you manage your hedgerows, whether you trim between rejuvenation events or not, you may only need to rejuvenate your hedge every 20-40 years to keep it thick and healthy.



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The two most common ways hedgerows 'fall out' of traditional and essential lifecycle management are:

Long-term repeated trimming

Trimming too often at the same height, reduces the value of the hedge to wildlife, threatens the hedge structure, and causes stem health to deteriorate leading to gaps.

This impacts the hedge's value as a wildlife habitat and corridor. Trimming hedges every year also significantly reduces the number of flowers and fruit available for wildlife, as many of Britain's native berry bearing species only flower on growth that is two years or older.



A hedgerow exhibiting structural decline associated with repeated trimming.

'Abandonment'

Hedgerows all eventually require management to stop them developing into a line of trees. Without the crucial rejuvenation phase of the hedge cycle, hedgerows lose the complexity of structure. During this process, the low shrubby cover that's needed by wildlife is gradually lost. Once it becomes a line of trees, it will develop gaps over time as trees are lost. At this stage, it's very difficult to return it to a shrubby hedgerow structure, and it will have lost many of its wildlife credentials. Timely rejuvenation is therefore essential to prevent this structural decline.



A hedgerow that has transitioned into a line of trees due to lack of rejuvenation.

Over-trimming and abandonment are the greatest threats to condition and extent of hedgerows as they result in stem loss and gappy-ness. For understandable socio-economic reasons, it has been many decades since periodic rejuvenation (lifecycle) management was commonplace. This has had two main consequences:

1. Many hedges are currently overdue the rejuvenation management needed to keep them healthy and alive in the long-term, as displayed by their declining structural condition.
2. A generation of farmers and landowners have never managed hedgerows this way, and are lacking the in-depth knowledge to begin.

It should be noted that threats to hedgerows stem from financial and knowledge constraints in the farming and landowner community, and support is required in both of these areas to be able to improve this habitat.

Conservation Actions 'Potential Measures'

Rejuvenating and expanding the hedgerow network by:

- Bringing hedgerows into [lifecycle management](#) including periodic rejuvenation. See the infographic on the next page and visit our website for management info.
- Establishing more **hedgerow trees**, ideally from within the hedge at point of rejuvenation.
- Establishing **species rich** hedgerows.
- Promoting **routine hedgerow management** within the lifecycle that benefits wildlife such as incremental trimming and longer trimming rotations.
- **Restoring (laying or coppicing) hedgerows** which have passed their peak maturity to encourage dense base regrowth and ensures another lifecycle.



Ecological Provisions

Hedgerows are a particularly valuable habitat as they have three main provisions which are utilised by different species assemblages. Hedgerows are a **'home habitat'**, many creatures, including nesting birds, hibernating hedgehogs, dormice and other small mammals, as well as insects like beetles and butterflies, live in hedgerows. 70% of the UK's landscape is farmland. Within this agriculturally-dominated landscape, hedgerows can be one of the best habitats available to many farmland species.

Hedgerows can also contribute essential resources as **complimentary habitats**. For example, many species use hedgerows for **food** such as leaves, flowers, berries, insects or small mammals. Some species rely on hedgerows as shelter from predators or the elements whilst out foraging. Other species, especially insects, rely on hedgerows and hedgerow trees to **find mates**.

Hedgerows also provide landscape **connectivity**. Hedgerows enable wildlife to move about the landscape, connecting populations that would otherwise be isolated and vulnerable. Bats use hedgerows as feeding sites and flight paths. Butterflies and other flying insects take advantage of the shelter hedges provide when in flight. Dormice are confined to hedges when travelling between woodlands as they are obligatory arboreal. As climate change affects species ranges hedges are essential routes of migration to suitable new habitat.

Different species assemblages use hedgerows differently so a variety of hedgerow shapes, sizes and maturities is vital. Staggering hedgerow management around the lifecycle ensure this variety.

Hedgerow management cycle

Hedgerows are a dynamic system - it isn't possible to keep them at exactly the same point indefinitely. Managing them on a cycle ensures their health and long term survival.

