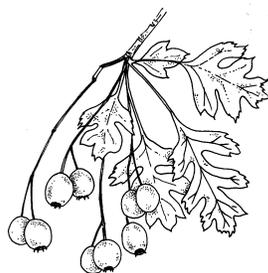


HEDGEROW HABITAT IN OXFORDSHIRE

1. INTRODUCTION

The hedgerow habitat generally resembles woodland edge and scrub, occurring in a linear form. As well as being important habitats in themselves, hedges form links between other habitats, such as woods, ponds and the rest of the hedge network, forming a network across country along which it is thought wildlife can travel. Usually the most important hedges for wildlife are those with the greatest diversity of both species and structure. The diversity of structure is particularly important for birds. The most species rich hedges are usually the oldest, and those that fulfil specific criteria now receive some measure of protection under the Hedgerow Regulations (1997). Although ancient hedges are very important, all hedges have some importance for wildlife. They are a primary habitat for at least 47 species of conservation concern in the UK, including 13 globally threatened or rapidly declining ones, more than for most other key habitats. They are especially important for butterflies and moths, farmland birds, bats and small mammals.



Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*

Habitats commonly associated with hedges include pasture, arable, ditches and road verges.

2. CURRENT STATUS

2.1 National

In 1990, it was estimated by the ITE (Institute of Terrestrial Ecology now Centre for Ecology and Hydrology) that about 80,000 km of hedgerows remained in SE England; of these, ADAS estimated that about 20% are ancient or species-rich. The net annual rate of loss was estimated by them at about 5% - thus an

estimated 53,000 km remained in 1998, of which 10,600 km are ancient or species-rich. There was a major loss of hedgerows through their removal in the decades after 1945, however since the passing of the Hedgerow Regulations (1997) the total length has remained more or less steady with new planting compensating for those removed.

2.2 Oxfordshire

The hedgerow network is an important part of the character and local distinctiveness of Oxfordshire's countryside. The CPRE Oxfordshire Hedgerow Survey (1997-9) produced an estimate of 7,820 km hedge in the county; suggesting a slight increase in the total length compared with existing (though not necessarily accurate) data. However there is still a loss of older species rich hedgerows, either through their neglect or removal. The loss of these hedges is only partly compensated for by new hedgerow planting which are not ecologically as rich.

Hedges also form an important element in the County's landscape, such as the rectangular grid of the Parliamentary Enclosure hedges, especially well seen from the Ridgeway, and the chequerboard pattern near Otmoor, reputedly the inspiration for the chess game in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Locally, for example in the Chilterns and in the former Wychwood Forest, woodland relic hedgerows provide evidence of assarting of ancient woodland.

Trees, both dead and alive, are important in hedgerows for a variety of wildlife. They form lookout posts and song posts, nesting sites and food sources for many species of bird; dead and hollow trees are a good habitat for bats, barn owls and insects. In the past, hedgerow trees were constantly renewed, with new saplings being allowed to grow to replace trees deliberately grown and felled for farm timber. Such timber is no longer needed. Dutch Elm Disease has also killed many trees so replacement trees are not developing. For various reasons, contractors trimming hedges sometimes neglect to raise the cutters to spare saplings, so they are trimmed with the rest of the hedge. Ivy is valuable as a source of late nectar and berries, as well as cover and nest sites for many species.

Deadwood in hedges is identified as an important element in the national plan. The usual method by which hedges are laid is to take out all material not required and remove it off site and/or burn it. This includes all the dead material. Thus, even potentially traditional wildlife friendly methods have, to a certain extent, been affected by the modern ideas of extreme neat and tidiness.

Hedges are landscape features as well as wildlife habitats. Thus, appropriate species for planting may be decided on local landscape or geographical considerations as well as ecological. Natural colonisation or regeneration should be used whenever appropriate.

There may be priority areas for the re-creation or creation of hedges, e.g. to restore or create links between woodlands. Where appropriate hedge planting should be diversified to include other habitat elements, e.g. small copses to act as further woodland links.

The network of hedges is thought to be the most important feature facilitating movement of wildlife within the countryside. Many species of farmland bird tend to move for only short distances at a time rather than undertaking long flights from site to site. Mammals especially need a large enough territory to maintain the size of their gene pool, which they can do only by being able to move, for example from woodland to woodland, rather than being isolated in 'island' reserves. To maintain the hedge network, it is important to maintain individual units within that network, regardless of whether the hedge is classed as ancient / species rich or not. Thus the Oxfordshire hedgerow objectives apply to all hedges, not just those that are species-rich, although species-rich hedges usually provide a greater diversity of habitat.

Hedgerows provide an important reservoir for beneficial insects whose encouragement would decrease the need for spraying crops with insecticides.

Black hairstreak *Satyrrium pruni*

