HEDGEROW MANIFESTO

care for these natural resources
When hedgerows are cherished and carefully maintained, they are a resource of great value to wildlife, and of tremendous natural beauty.

Contents

Hedgerows are important ........................................... 4
Cutting prevents flowering ........................................... 6
Best practice ......................................................... 8
Maintenance .......................................................... 10
Shape and machinery .............................................. 12
Restoration ............................................................ 14
Nesting birds ............................................................ 18

Hedgerows are crucial for wildlife. They provide food and refuge for insects, amphibians, mammals and birds.

They are a significant part of the natural landscape that we all enjoy. Many hedgerows are ancient boundaries that have been known for generations.

Hedgerows connect areas of natural vegetation: they provide corridors for wildlife that are critical for the movement of animals and the continuation of viable populations.

Regular flaying and mismanagement of hedgerows destroys their value for wildlife.

In 2014 Monmouthshire County Council adopted a Pollinator Policy, to care for insect pollinator populations.

In this Hedgerow Manifesto we describe best practice that we hope will be widely adopted by everyone with responsibility for maintaining hedgerows and roadside trees.

This Manifesto is a plea for understanding of the value of hedgerows and how to care for them in the best way.
Hedgerows are important

- They provide food and safe haven for insects, birds, amphibians and small mammals.
- Hedges guard against soil erosion by rain and flood.
- Hedges are valuable wildlife corridors, linking areas of vegetation.
- Bats feed on insects in the air around hedgerows, and fly along hedgerows between sites.
- Hedges give protection from the wind.
- Hedgerows form a treasured part of our landscape where we live and work.
- They are part of our cultural history – for 500 years’ hedgerows in Monmouthshire have provided boundaries to land, fields, parishes and gardens.

Plants that are characteristic of Monmouthshire hedgerows include alder, ash, bramble, dogwood, elder, elm, field maple, hawthorn, holly, honeysuckle, small leaved lime and spindle berry. Their flowers provide nectar and pollen that feed insects. A recent study1 at the Botanic Garden of Wales indicated that honey bees preferentially foraged on native hedgerow flowers rather than exotic flora.

Hawthorn hedgerows are particularly valuable, especially when allowed to grow into a tall, wide hedge, thick at the base. Flowers pollinated by insects go on to produce the fruits, berries, seeds and nuts that provide food for wildlife throughout the winter. Dried stems are important for overwintering insects, while the hedges themselves provide crucial cover and shelter for wildlife, and are very important roosting places for birds.

According to the RSPB, hedges now support 80% of our woodland birds, 50% of our mammals and 30% of our butterflies.

Well-managed hedgerows benefit farmers, land owners and gardeners by providing, in addition to shade and enclosure for animals:
1. Populations of insect pollinators to ensure optimal yields of insect pollinated crops;
2. Populations of natural predators;
3. Protection of land resources, assisting soil conservation and reducing run-off;
4. Diversification of income, including agri-environment payments.

Across Britain, half of all the hedgerows present in the late 1940s have been removed. More than 30 bird species nest in hedgerows and this loss of habitat is estimated to have resulted in the loss of around 5 million pairs of hedgerow birds. While some bird species, such as Wren and Common whitethroat, obtain most of their food within hedgerows, for others the hedgerow provides safe access to open fields that would otherwise be unusable. This is because many small birds like Robins, Sparrows and Blackbirds need cover to stay safe, and seldom forage far from their protective cover.


Left, Small copper butterfly
Right, Goldfinch feeding on thistle seeds
Hedges that are cut will not flower next spring

For maximum value to wildlife, hedgerows **must** be allowed to flower

Hedgerows that are cut cannot flower in the following spring. Our proposed regime is to cut hedgerows every third year, and never to cut hedgerows on both sides of a road in the same year. This means that each hedgerow will flower in two years out of three. The flowers provide food for insects, which are pollinators, and in turn are critical food for birds and mammals. Pollinated flowers yield fruits and seeds to support a wide range of wildlife, especially during winter months. Not cutting hedgerows on each side of a road in the same year gives wildlife populations far greater chances of survival.

For maximum value to wildlife, hedgerows must be allowed to flower

The Redwing (below) is a common winter-visiting thrush that relies on berries that can form only on uncut hedges. Thrushes roost at night in hedgerows.

Only those branches which escape the flail go on to flower and bear fruit.
Best practice

Flowering hedgerows are crucial for maintaining biodiversity.*

Cutting hedges removes the stems that would otherwise flower.

We recommend:
1. Hedgerows are cut only in January or February
2. Hedgerows are cut only once in three years
3. Hedgerows on each side of a road never cut in the same year
4. The minimum height should be two metres.

YEAR 1
Trim side A
Side B allowed to flower

YEAR 2
Trim side B
Side A allowed to flower

YEAR 3
No trimming
Both sides A and B flower

YEAR 4
As Year 1

* Biodiversity (short for biological diversity): the variety of life on earth.

CREATE A HEDGEROW PLAN

Draw up a plan showing the three year rotation to share with hedge trimming contractors.
Maintenance of hedges

Left alone, a hedgerow will continue to grow upwards and outwards and will eventually become a line of trees. Where farmers keep cattle or sheep, a good hedge is essential, for although wire fences are more readily erected, they do not provide shelter as do hedgerows. Techniques for managing hedges include laying, trimming and coppicing.

Hedgerows that are cut cannot produce flowers the following spring. This is because most trees and shrubs in hedgerows flower on stems produced in the previous year. Therefore, cutting hedges every year means that wildlife is deprived of flowers, seeds, nuts and berries.

Time of year

Hedges must never be cut during the bird-nesting season 1 March – 31 August. Outside this season hedges should be cut only when they contain neither flowers for insects, nor food for birds. This means to cut hedgerows only in January or February, when all seeds and berries have been eaten and before nesting begins.

Exceptions

Exceptions are the road-facing sides of hedges that need to be trimmed for safety reasons. If the hedge contains very fast growing species it may need more frequent cutting—in this case, cut the sides of a hedge every year—but cut the top only every third year, and only in January or February.

COMPLIANCE HEDGE TRIMMING DATES.

Wales and England Cross

HOPPER’S* HEDGEROW HISTORY HYPOTHESIS

Age of hedgerow = Number of woody plant species x 100.

Hooper’s Rule holds that the age of a hedge may be gauged from the number of woody plant species in 30 yards, multiplied by 100.

*Max Hooper 1934–2017

Left, House sparrow

Inset: Grey-haired mining bee

10

11
Shape
The minimum height for a wildlife-useful hedge is two metres. The higher, wider and denser the hedge, the better. A thick hedge provides the integrity needed by the farmer, as well as nest sites for birds and small mammals. Ideally it should be fenced on the field side if there are grazing stock in the field. An ‘A’ shaped hedge is of most benefit, providing good shelter, stock-proofing and wildlife value. This allows a wide base to be developed and if the top is not trimmed, then hedgerow trees can develop. A tall, wide, dense hedge is of greatest value for wildlife. Some birds are ground-nesting, for example partridges, and need good cover at the base of a hedge for nesting.

Machinery
Most hedgerows are trimmed with tractor-mounted flails. This mechanised cutting can achieve satisfactory results if done correctly i.e. cutting twigs rather than major stems. Trimming should follow the direction of any previous hedge laying to minimise damage to the wood. The flail trimmer is designed to cut through material up to a maximum of 2cm thick. When it is used on thicker stems the result is damaged, split stems that are susceptible to fungal diseases, particularly if this is repeated annually. A healthy hedge can normally recover well from severe cutting; however, repeated, over-zealous cutting will gradually cause a hedge to die off. A tractor-mounted circular saw should be used where thicker growth needs to be cut.

Cutting in September removes late flowers and the autumn berries that support wildlife.

Hedgerow brambles provide flowers and food for insects, birds and small mammals – from early May until late October.
Hedge laying is a country craft which has been practised for centuries and remains relevant today. There is no machine which can replicate the work of the hedge-layer.

Restoration of hedges
As hedges grow, they gradually become more tree-like and less bush-like; gaps tend to appear lower down and the hedge ceases to provide an effective barrier. Ideally the hedge should be allowed to grow sufficiently tall so that it can be laid, both to fill in the gaps and to ensure the long term viability of the hedge by promoting vigorous regrowth from the base of the hedge.

Hedge laying
Cattle and horses lean against hedges and make gaps, while sheep push through hedge bases. In hedge laying, the cut stems are bent over at an angle, and these prevent sheep pushing through, while the stakes driven into the hedge and the binding along the top, make the fence strong to resist the weight of cattle or horses.

Throughout the UK there are different styles of hedge laying — the Monmouthshire practice is to have a double brush hedge with stakes driven in at an angle of 35°, 30 inches apart. Dead wood is used inside the hedge to protect the regrowth from being browsed by stock. The dead wood and live pleachers (laid stems) are bound down the centre line, with the top and side of the hedge being trimmed. Laying the hedge tidies it and encourages the shrubs to regenerate, keeping the hedge bushy and healthy. Regular trimming will keep the hedge in good order for up to fifty years, when it may be appropriate to lay the hedge again, or even to coppice it.

This hedge needs restoration. It has been laid in the past, and could now be restored by layering, by coppicing, and/or by planting in the gaps.
Coppicing
Coppicing a hedge i.e. cutting it off completely just above ground level is a valid way of restoring hedges where the temporary loss of the hedge is acceptable. Coppicing will often take place in conjunction with the planting up of any gaps in the hedge and is the best treatment for very overgrown hedges. Where hedges are to be coppiced, sections should be done over years so that there is no long period with them all cut.

Boundary trees
Large trees within hedges are known as boundary trees, and these support considerable biodiversity. There should be no cultivation or weed control within three metres of the base of the tree, and cutting should be limited to work essential to the safety of people or livestock.
Where feasible, fallen branches should be left inside the hedge to help conserve the dead wood that is needed by invertebrates and fungi. If they must be chipped, the chippings should not be spread over banks or verges. This practice does not favour wild flora.

Saplings in hedgerows
Saplings that are suitably situated to grow into boundary trees should be retained – as they grow they provide song-posts for birds. Mechanical hedge cutting can reduce the number of saplings so take care to protect from trimming by marking in a way that can be seen from the tractor cab.

Filling gaps in hedges
When planting to fill gaps in hedges use native plants of locally common species. In Monmouthshire these include ash, blackthorn, crab apple, dog rose, dogwood, field maple, hawthorn, hazel, holly, oak, small-leaved lime and spindle berry. When planting within an existing hedge, to give the new plant a good start, thoroughly clear the gap of vegetation and cut the hedge plants on either side back to healthy growth. Do this in winter when the ground is not frozen between November and March. Keep your new plants free of competitive weeds and water them often until they are well established.
Hedge cutting that is in breach of Cross Compliance regulations should be reported to the Government Agricultural Department.

Evidence of birds nests being damaged or destroyed should be reported by phoning police on 101 and reporting to the local wildlife crime officer.

NESTING BIRDS

Birds’ main nesting time is 1 March to 31 August. It is very difficult to know when birds are nesting in a hedge, and in some years many species are still nesting well into August. If nesting birds are present, any work which might harm them or their nests is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Yellowhammers (left) are commonly still nesting in hedgerows in August.

Study of birds using hedges\(^3\) shows that both total bird numbers and total species numbers increases with the size of the hedge: typically tall, diverse hedges have five times as many birds, and three times more species of birds.

\(^3\) Newton, I. (2017) British Birds 110, pp 77-91
The Hedgerow Manifesto is endorsed by the following organisations:

AONB
Bee Friendly Monmouthshire
Bees for Development
Bees Wasps & Ants Recording Society (BWARS)
Bumblebee Conservation Trust
Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW)
Country Land and Business Association (CL A)
The Farmers Union of Wales (FUW)
Friends of the Earth (FoE)
Gwent Amphibian & Reptile Group
Gwent Beekeepers Association
Gwent Wildlife Trust
Humble by Nature
Keep Wales Tidy
Lower Wye Ramblers
Monmouthshire Moth and Butterfly Group
Monmouthshire Bat Group
Monmouthshire Meadows Group
Plant Life
RSPB
Small Holders Association
Small Woods Association
Transition Towns
Woodland Trust
Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)
Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Hedgelayers Association
Wye Valley Society

For further information contact

Bee Friendly Monmouthshire

Bees for Development
www.beesfordevelopment.org

Gwent Wildlife Trust
www.gwentwildlife.org

Hedgelay er blog
www.hedgelayer.freeserve.co.uk

Hedgerow Maintenance by St Briavels, Hewelsfield & Brockweir Parish Grasslands Project

Find your local councillor
www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/home/local-democracy-and-councillors/people-at-the-council/councillors

Monmouthshire Meadows Group
www.monmouthshir emeadows.org.uk

National Hedgelaying Society
www.hedgelaying.org.uk

Welsh Government GAEC 7: Maintenance of landscape features. January 2017

Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk

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www.beefriendlymonmouthshire.org