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

Good hedgerow management will support an abundance of insects on the farm, provide habitat for a range of birds and mammals, and provide a rich supply of food for some species throughout the year. The management of those field margins abutting the hedge is also critical for a wide range of species (see the separate sheet entitled 'Arable field margins').

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

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

Maintaining a diversity of field boundary types around the farm suits the needs of the widest range of species. Partridges and yellowhammers prefer short hedgerows (of under 2 metres) with grass margins. Bullfinches and song thrushes prefer wide hedgerows over 4 metres tall. Many hole-nesting birds can use old hedgerow trees.

A dense base protects nesting birds

Thick, dense cover at the base of a hedge plays an important part in protecting nesting birds from predation. The only species that benefit from gappy hedges are predators and crows.

Old hedgerow trees may be the richest wildlife feature on a farm

Mature and dying trees are home to a wide variety of insects and other animals that may be found nowhere else on a farm. Because of their importance as a habitat, such trees require protection and a long-term plan to replace them.

HOW CAN I RESTORE AND MANAGE HEDGEROWS?

HEDGE TRIMMING

- The basic principles for good hedge trimming are as follows:
 - Trim in January or February to avoid the destruction of birds' nests (present from March to August) and to allow any berry crop to be used by wintering birds (September to December).
 - Trim on a two- or three-year rotation, rather than annually, to ensure that thick nesting cover is available somewhere on the farm every year, and to boost the berry crop that generally develops on second-year growth.
- Rotational trimming saves time and money.
- If soil or crop conditions require an autumn trimming regime, then 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.

LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT BY LAYING OR COPPING

- You are likely to find that trimming will keep hedgerows in good condition for many years, but that occasional restoration work is necessary to prevent gaps developing or hedges turning into a line of trees. Hedgerow restoration can be performed in the winter by one of the following methods.

- Laying (cutting stems part way through and laying them along the hedgeline) has a less drastic effect on wildlife and maintains the character of the landscape, but requires skilled labour.
- Coppicing (cutting the stems at ground level) is the best method of restoration where the hedge is too overgrown to be laid because the stems are too thick.
- Both coppicing and laying will reduce birds' breeding opportunities in the few years immediately after management and should therefore be carried out on a long-rotation basis. This is preferable to managing large sections in one year as it helps to minimise the loss of nesting habitat available each spring.
- It may be necessary to use plastic tubes, spirals or quills to protect young plants from grazing rabbits or deer.

PLANTING UP GAPPY HEDGES

- Use species that are native to your area.
- Undertake any planting during the winter, provided the ground is not frozen. The best time is early winter, when the ground is warm and some moisture is available.
- Planting up gaps can be done in conjunction with coppicing existing plants if these lack a thick base. This will give the new plants minimum competition.
- Before planting, you should ensure that the ground is free of vegetation, using glyphosate if necessary. Alternatively, you can plant through black polythene to

PROTECTION FROM FIELD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- Nesting birds need a thick hedge base. You can maintain this by avoiding spray drift, over-zealous trimming, ploughing too close to the hedge or 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 Tir Gofal and are particularly important for nesting birds such as yellowhammers and whitethroats, as well as for buffering hedges and other natural habitats from spray drift.

MAINTAINING HEDGEROW TREES

- Where hedgerow trees are a feature of the hedge, you should plan to replace mature or dead trees by allowing saplings of native species to be left untouched during trimming.
- Retain old, dying and dead trees where these are not a hazard, as they support important insect communities and may be used by hole-nesting birds.
- On arable land, 20-metre set-aside strips will protect the roots of mature hedgerow trees from damage during cultivation.

KEY POINTS

- The main aim of hedgerow management should be to maintain a range of different types and sizes of hedgerow, in order to support a wide variety of wildlife.
- A hedgerow with a continuous, dense base and adjacent perennial grass margin provides the best cover for nesting birds.
- Funds from Tir Gofal can be used to restore hedges that have become gappy or overgrown, to plant new hedgerows where they have been lost and to create grassy margins adjacent to the hedges. Some Local Authorities also operate grant schemes for hedge planting and restoration.

Many of these guidelines may be funded by Tir Gofal, the agri-environment scheme for Wales. Get further info from:



Advisory Officer, The RSPB, North Wales Office, Maes Y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.
Tel: 01248 363800



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF.
Tel: 01425 652381



Farming Connect, Y Lanfa, Trefechan, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 1AS.
Tel: 08456 000 813



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Cymru, Ffordd Arran, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LW.
Tel: 01341 421456

Sponsored by:



Countryside Council for Wales, Maes Y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.
Tel: 01248 385500