



for birds
for people
for ever



Richard Winspear (RSPB Images)

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 sheets entitled 'Arable field margins' and 'Field margins on grasslands').

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 turtle doves prefer wide hedgerows over 4 metres tall. Many hole-nesting birds can use old hedgerow trees. Corn buntings prefer field boundaries in the form of hedgeless wide grass banks.

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.

A network of hedgerows can act as important links between wildlife habitats on the farm

Many species such as dormice will benefit from tall hedgerows linking woodlands around the farm.

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 and populations of overwintering insects.
- If you have an agri-environment scheme, you are required to avoid hedge trimming between 1 March and 31 July.
- 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 COPPICING

- 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.
 - 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.

- Laying (cutting stems part way through and interweaving them along the hedgeline) has a less drastic effect on wildlife and maintains the character of the landscape, but needs skilled labour.
- Both coppicing and laying will reduce birds' breeding opportunities in the few years immediately after management and should therefore be carried out over many years rather than managing large sections in one year.

PLANTING UP GAPPY HEDGES

- Use species that are native to your area and use local sources of plants.
- 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 suppress weeds and reduce moisture loss.
- It may be necessary to use plastic tubes, spirals or quills to protect young plants from grazing rabbits or deer.

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 1 metre wide between the hedge bank and the crop. Wider margins can be funded by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (see below for contact details) 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.
- Either side of a hedge that includes several mature hedgerow trees, 20-metre set-aside strips will protect the roots 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, 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.

Seek specialist advice on management of ancient hedgerows, which may suffer from drastic management changes.

Funds from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme can be used to restore hedges that have become gappy or overgrown, and to plant new hedgerows where these have been lost.

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Payment for some of this management may be available as part of a wider package of work under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and some Environmentally Sensitive Areas. You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL. Tel: 01767 680551



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 024 7669 6699



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