

# Species-Rich Hedgerows

The UK

Habitat Action

Plan for species-rich hedgerows

defines them as hedges “which contain 5 or more native woody species on average in a 30 metre length”.

Hedges that contain less than 5 trees and shrubs in each 30m, but have a rich variety of other plants at their base, are also included.

It is estimated that about one third of hedges in Northern Ireland are species-rich, giving a length of about 41,000km.

Hedges perform a variety of farming functions such as protecting and enclosing animals, and act as windbreaks that help control soil erosion and prevent water run-off. They are also important for many other landscape, cultural, agricultural and archaeological reasons.

From a biodiversity point of view, hedges are vital habitats and sources of food and shelter for wildlife. They also provide corridors to help wildlife move around. This may become increasingly important if climate change causes plants and animals to migrate towards more suitable conditions. Without these corridor they can't move.

The large number of animals and plants found in hedgerows reflects their complexity. Hedgerows include elements of both woodland, especially woodland edge and scrub, and of grassland.

## History

Hedgerows are a very old way of identifying boundaries. A basic pattern of hedges and fields was established in Britain about 1000 years ago and in some areas has changed very little.

Although Northern Ireland has the highest density of field boundaries in the UK, hedges are generally much younger than in England, Scotland and Wales. The majority of hedges here were probably planted between 1750 and 1850, and often with mixed species.





## *Supported Species*

Hedgerows are rich habitats for all kinds of wildlife. Many plants, birds, mammals and insects make their homes under and within hedges. They provide valuable nesting sites and song posts for birds. Wood mice (also known as field mice) use hedges for cover and can move long distances along them foraging for food.

Other mammals found in or around hedges include foxes, badgers, rabbits, stoats, hedgehogs, Irish hares and bats.

## *Threats to Species-Rich Hedgerows*

There are a number of reasons why hedgerows are under threat. Lack of time and labour, as well as an increase in costs are the main reasons for farmers not implementing traditional forms of hedgerow management.

Using modern machinery inappropriately, cutting too often, not often enough or at the wrong times, can lead to a deterioration in the condition of a hedge. Too many grazing animals or badly applied chemicals to an adjacent crop can do the same.

A hedge may then become gappy or overgrown and, consequently, fail to perform its main original function - keeping animals in a field.



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