HEDGEROWS

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The patchwork landscape of fields surrounded by high hedgerows is a traditional and familiar feature of Ireland's countryside. Hedgerows are in effect linear strips of woodland, which are often vital habitats for wildlife and important for the visual quality of the landscape. Awareness of the importance of hedges among farmers has increased in recent years since the introduction of the *Rural Environment Protection Scheme,* which offers annual payments to farmers to conserve hedges and other rural features. Currently there are indications that hedgerows are not being removed as much as in the 1970s and 1980s.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Hedgerows are man-made additions to the landscape. Many of our hedges date from the 18th and 19th centuries, but some are even earlier, dating from Tudor times. *Hawthorn* - a native shrub - was chosen as the most popular hedging plant in the 18th and 19th century hedgerows because it can form a dense, stockproof hedge in a short period of time. Hedgerows were originally intended as fences and to mark property and townland boundaries, but they have gradually become 'naturalised' into the landscape, and now form an important component of the rural environment.

HEDGEROWS ~ *NATURE RESERVES IN MINIATURE*

Since they were created, plants other than *hawthorn* have colonised hedgerows. Spring is the best time to identify most species, when they are in flower. *Blackthorn*, *wild cherry* and *gorse* are the first to blossom, from March to late April. In early May, the cascades of white blossom of the *hawthorn* emerge, followed by *elder* and *crab apple* in late May to early June. Intertwined with these shrubs are climbers such as *ivy* (flowering in autumn), *clematis* (the familiar old man's beard) and *honeysuckle. Hazel* is uncommon in hedges because it is a slow coloniser, and may indicate where there was woodland originally.

If you walk past a hedgerow in spring and early summer, look out for herbaceous plants on the banks and verges. The most conspicuous and common species are *cow parsley* and *hogweed* (both have tight clumps of many, small white flowers), *foxgloves, herb robert, goosegrass, garlic mustard* and *lady's smock*. You may also find *primroses* and *dog violets* on steeper, shady banks. Many of the grasses in the hedge bottoms will now be common in intensively managed farmland. The best way to identify all these plants is with the aid of a field guide - you will quickly become familiar with the commoner species.

Hedgerows are also reservoirs for insects, the most familiar being the butterflies and moths. The larvae of butterflies have characteristic food plants: the orange-tip feeds on *lady's smock*, the *speckled wood* and *hedge brown* on various grasses and the *tortoiseshell* on nettles.

The insects are in turn food for insectivorous birds such as *wrens, hedge-sparrows* and *whitethroats. Song thrushes* and *blackbirds* eat *earthworms*, *slugs* and *snails* of the hedge bottoms, while the autumn berry crops are food for *yellowhammers, bullfinches, chaffinches* and winter visitors such as *fieldfares* and *redwings.* Few of these birds could survive in numbers in the countryside without the hedgerow harvest of insects, seeds and berries. Hedgerows also provide valuable nesting-space and song-posts for our breeding birds.

Hedgerows give many of our mammals food, shelter and protection. It is difficult to see more than the occasional glimpse of these mammals since most are nocturnal. You are more likely to hear the highpitched squeaks of the smaller mammals like *fieldmice* and *pygmy shrews* in the undergrowth of the hedgerow. *Rabbits* can be seen emerging from their burrows at dawn or dusk and if you are fortunate you may see *badgers,* which often use hedge banks for their sets. *Hedgehogs* will commonly feed, breed and hibernate in hedgerows. At the top of the food chain are the *stoat, fox* and *barn owl* preying on the small mammals and birds.

HEDGE TRIMMING — IS IT BENEFICIAL OR DAMAGING?

Contrary to popular opinion, periodical hedge trimming need not be harmful. It can greatly improve a hedge which has become thin and 'leggy' through neglect. What can be harmful is using the wrong type of hedge cutter for large woody stems and indiscriminate cutting of hedgerow trees with chain saws. If a hedge is cut too frequently and kept very low, the amount of wildlife will be markedly reduced.

The best way to manage hedgerows is to cut them in rotation, so that there will always be some left uncut every year. Late winter is the best time for trimming to avoid undue disturbance to wildlife. As an experiment, try to record the number of bird species you see in or near a low, trimmed hedge and an unmanaged hedge and compare the two. The ideal form of hedge for wildlife is tall, broad and dense with plenty of undergrowth. This will provide maximum shelter, protection, food and nesting space. You should be able to record more bird species in this type of hedge.

HEDGEROW REMOVAL

There no accurate current figures for hedgerow removal in Ireland. In eastern counties and areas dominated by arable farming, hedgerows have been removed more frequently than in grassland areas, in response to increasing mechanisation. However, on some intensive dairy farms, hedgerows have been replaced by a paddock system to regulate grazing, where stock are controlled by electric fencing. Ireland appears to have suffered less from hedge removal than England and France, where there is a much higher proportion of arable land.

WHY ARE HEDGEROWS REMOVED?

Large machinery is difficult to manoeuvre in small fields and the farmer saves time and money by making one large field out of several small ones. Shading of crops

and harbouring of pests and weeds have been cited as disadvantages. Lastly hedgerows have to be maintained - this usually means hiring a contractor, which can be expensive.

TREES FROM HEDGEROWS

Lowland Ireland often gives the deceptive impression of being comfortably wooded, because of trees in the hedgerows. In fact, less than 1% of Ireland is covered in broadleaved woodland, and only about half of this area is mature woodland. Many more broadleaved trees have been planted since the mid-1990s, but there is still a need for more single trees, groups of trees and small woods in rural areas. Trees were often planted among the rows of *hawthorn* for timber, but many of among the rows of hawthorn for timber, but many of those that survive are overmature. These include *beech, oak, elm* and *horsechestnut. Ash* is now probably the commonest hedgerow tree and will often colonise naturally. Almost no mature *elms* now survive because of *Dutch elm disease* but *elms* do still survive in numbers as saplings. We must expect old hedgerow trees to be felled when they become dangerous, especially when they are beside roads, but trees can often be replaced simply by avoiding saplings when the hedge is trimmed. When they are left uncut the young trees can be allowed to grow up through the hedgerow to reach maturity.

ADVANTAGES OF HEDGEROWS

Even though the arguments against them seem to be convincing, hedgerows do offer advantages to the farmer. They provide shelter for crops which could be damaged when exposed to the full force of the wind. A hedge of moderate height will act as a very efficient wind-break. Hedges also provide valuable shelter for animals and help to curb soil erosion and flooding. There is evidence that hedges act as barriers to the spread of diseases such as *bovine TB*. Lastly there are indications from research that hedgerows provide a balance in nature that favours farming. Even though they harbour pests, the predators of those pests are also present (these include *spiders, ladybirds* and *birds*), and hedgerows may be able to damp out major fluctuations of agricultural pests as a result.

HEDGEROW PROJECTS

Hedgerows are ideal for teaching biology because of their large variety of flora and fauna which is similar to that found on the edge of woodland. If you are going to study hedgerows, always ask the landowner beforehand.

HOW CAN YOU BECOME INVOLVED?

A very interesting and worthwhile detective exercise for your townland or parish is to study the *old six-inch Ordnance Survey maps* (ask your Co. Council) and the *Geological Survey aerial photographs*. You should be able to determine which hedges have been removed or added since 1837. You can then survey your area on the ground to find out how many hedges exist at the present time. The information you collect will add to a *valuable historical record* of the *changing landscape* of *your locality.*

FURTHER SOURCES OF ADVICE AND INFORMATION

Irish Wildlife Trust
107 Lr. Baggot Street, Dublin 2.
Email: wildlife@indigo.ie.
Advice on wildlife in hedgerows.

Birdwatch Ireland,
Email: bird@indigo.ie.
Advice on birds and hedgerows.

An Taisce (National Trust for Ireland)
Tailors Hall,
Back Lane.
Dublin 8.
Email: planning@connect.ie.
Advice on natural, historical and cultural aspects of the countryside.

If you have any specific wildlife-related questions, you can contact your local Wildlife Ranger (see regional 'phone directories).

FURTHER READING

Irish Hedges by Richard Nain, Folens Environmental Library Series.
Hedgerows by A. Angus, Partridge Press, London, 1987.
Hedgerows - Their History and Wildlife by R. & N. Muir, Michael Joseph Ltd., London 1987.
Hedges: The Council of Europe (Planning and Management Series, No. 1) Strasbourg, 1988.
Hedgerows and Verges by W.H. Dowdeswell, Allen and Unwin, London, 1987.
Small Woods and Hedgerows by V. Porter, Pelham Books, Stephen Greene Press, 1990.
Hedges by E. Pollard, M.D. Hooper and N.W. Moore, New Naturalist Series, Collins 1974.
Discovering Hedgerows by David Streeter and Rosamund Richardson, BBC Publications, 1982.

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