

On the Verge of Success

The Importance for Wildlife of our Roadside Verges

Suffolk Naturalists' Society recently organised a conference on this topic, which was attended by two BNS members, Bob Buck & Giles Morris, who manage the St George's Flower Bank LNR on the A369 near Pill. Here is a summary of the key points raised on this very informative day.

Speakers included representatives from Plantlife, Buglife, Butterfly Conservation, Highways England and several local authorities (see links below). They listed 28 Local Authorities who "manage" a total of 2,189 protected verges in the UK. Suffolk have had Roadside Nature Reserves for over 40 years. The only authority from our area that merited a mention was Gloucestershire.

A summary of the best practice management regime for both flora and fauna is:

- No cutting between April and late August – until flowering and seed-setting is complete;
- Manage most verges with just 1 or 2 cuts per year;
- Cut and collect is essential – to reduce soil fertility;
- Low soil fertility is key – reduced growth of vigorous species allows greater floral diversity;
- Aim for a mosaic of sward length – leaving some longer refuges uncut for invertebrate + mammal over-wintering;
- Reduce hedge cutting/flailing to once every 3 years or less – improves invertebrate diversity and berry production;
- Maintaining a 1m width close-cut strip next to the carriageway is usually sufficient to provide adequate sight-lines for drivers;

It was pleasing to find that the management of St George's Flower Bank fulfils most of the criteria.

Adopting these basic guidelines not only increases the biodiversity of roadside verges, it is cheaper for local authorities than more regular mowing and also provides excellent carbon sequestration.

Low fertility > less annual growth > greater biodiversity > less mowing required > money saved.

A win-win result!

A link to one of the presentations:

https://issuu.com/suffolknaturalistsociety/docs/schofield_highways_for_wildlife?fr=sYzE4Njk0NDQ1MQ

FAQ page on the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust website:

<https://www.lincstrust.org.uk/wildlife/wildlife-gardening/wildflower-hub/verges-faq>