

Hedgerows are such a ubiquitous element of the Irish landscape and provide a very important wildlife habitat. As we have so little native woodland in Ireland, hedges are an important substitute for woodland edge habitat. They host a wide range of plant and shrub species, insects, birds and mammals. Most hedgerows originate from planting and typically form field or property boundaries. Historically, many of our hedgerows would have been planted from the 18th century onwards, following the enactment of legislation requiring landowners to enclose their land. Today, it is estimated that Ireland has a hedgerow length of around 300,000km.

Common Species

Hedgerows are generally manmade structures planted to provide stock-proof barriers and field boundaries. Many occur on raised banks of earth that are derived from the excavation of associated drainage ditches. They commonly support many native and non-native trees and shrubs. A survey by the Irish Wildlife Trust in the late 1980s revealed that hedgerows are home to 37 species of shrubs and trees and 105 species of wild flora. A wide variety of tree and shrub species in a hedgerow can sometimes indicate that the hedgerow has been in existence for a long time. Spinose or prickly spine bearing shrubs such as hawthorn and blackthorn were commonly used as a hedging material as their prickly branches form a good deterrent to livestock. Other shrubs also found their way into hedgerows, such as elder, guelder rose, dog rose, wild cherry, crab apple, holly and hazel. In certain areas, rarer shrubs such as spindle, wild damson and buckthorn would creep in slowly from nearby scrub and



woodland. The various shrubs make themselves better known in spring, when they blossom, and in autumn, when the blossoms have produced the harvest of berries, fruit and nuts - valued food for animals in winter.

Diverse hedgerow

Since it is difficult for farmers to cultivate right up to the base of the hedgerow, wild grasses and herbs such as cow parsley, hogweed and wild angelica are generally

abundant along the margins. These strips and the hedgerow base provide a habitat for animals which need the shelter and food that neighbouring pasture or arable land cannot provide.

Hedgerows as habitats

A well-managed, mature, hedgerow will have a three dimensional structure that provides a range of habitats for invertebrates, birds and mammals. Old hedgerow trees are often the most valuable because their many branches, fissured bark and holes provide nesting and roosting spaces for birds such as tits and tree creepers, and even, on occasion, the increasingly scarce barn owl. Bats also like to roost in old, hollow hedgerow trees and hunt for insects along the hedge itself. Hundreds of different species of invertebrates have found their niches on the leaves, twigs and bark of hedgerow shrubs.



Hedgerows are chosen by a sizeable number of common bird species for nesting and roosting: 55 of the 110 bird species recorded regularly in Birdwatch Ireland's Countryside Bird Survey use them during the breeding season. These include the linnet and yellowhammer, two species which have declined in Ireland.

The base of the hedgerow, with its leaf litter and dead branches and twigs contains invertebrates, and the birds and mammals that feed on them, such as wrens and hedgehogs. The under-storey of the hedgerow provides nesting sites for birds, such as robins and yellowhammers, as well as seeds and berries. The trees provide another niche for invertebrates, as well as nesting sites and song posts for birds and a further supply of food. The associated ditches, banks and verges provide shelter and food for a still wider range of animals. Many mammals avoid open country and use hedgerows as links between burrows and feeding sites or feed in close proximity to hedgerows (Mills, 1988). Birds show reluctance to cross open fields, or, in the case of the kestrel and the barn owl, hunt along the grass verge of the hedgerow.



Threats

The most significant threats to hedgerows include inappropriate management and clearance of hedgerows for development of land and agricultural expansion. Changing farming practices in the 20th century led to the removal of hedgerows and to the intensive cultivation of the land. Both of these factors led to a reduction in species diversity both through physical removal of habitat and through disturbance of remaining habitats.

Badly managed hedgerow

A further pressure on hedgerows comes from one-off houses in a rural setting, which often results in the removal of the existing hedgerow composed of a variety of species and its replacement by a hedgerow composed of a single, often non-native, species.

To promote the growth of a dense, stockproof, wildlife-friendly hedge, it needs to be maintained by trimming back and replanting as necessary and by hedgelaying or coppicing to encourage new growth from ground level and thus rejuvenate the hedge.

Hedge laying involves partially cutting through the living stems of trees and shrubs growing in a hedgerow near ground level, and bending them over at an angle. The cut stems are staked and bound together to produce a strong hedge.



Laid hedge



Teagasc, the State agricultural advisory authority (www.teagasc.ie) is promoting a new code of practice for cutting hedgerows. Working closely with Teagasc is Networks for Nature (www.networksfornature.com), dedicated to the conservation and proper management of hedgerows. Both groups highlight the traditional skill of "laying", which produces a dense, stockproof, wildlife-friendly hedge, and "coppicing", by which tall, leggy hedgerows can be restored and made stockproof. Both these techniques are supported by the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), through which farmers are paid to manage the environment on their farms (www.agriculture.gov.ie).

Legislation

Section 40 of [the Wildlife act 1976](#) as amended by Section 46 of the [Wildlife \(Amendment Act\) 2000](#), restricts the cutting, grubbing, burning, or destruction by other means of vegetation growing on uncultivated land or in hedges or ditches during the nesting and breeding season for birds and wildlife, from 1st March to 31st August. This applies to private land-users local authorities, public bodies and contractors. It is a policy of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to prosecute where there appears to have been a breach of the law. More information is available on www.npws.ie under Policy.

What Can I Do?

- If you are concerned about any activities in your area that are destructive to hedgerows, you can report details to the Gardai or your local [Wildlife Ranger](#), whose number will be in the telephone directory.
- When planting a new hedge it is important to use native species grown from native seed sources. Where possible, use seeds that have been locally sourced
- If you have hedgerows on your property, you should consider appropriate management techniques. Without appropriate regenerative management we will lose many of our hedges to old age in the near future. The traditional craft of hedge-laying is an effective method of rejuvenation. Information about appropriate hedgerow management can be found at www.teagasc.ie/publications/forestry/hedges.htm
- For more information about hedgerows visit www.networksfornature.com, and www.thehedge.org.

