Verges Document 1: Why we should manage grassland verges for wildlife

Introduction

The purpose of this leaflet is to show why managing verges with nature in mind is good both for nature, people and for public finances. All councils, County, Town and Parish are now legally obliged to take account of biodiversity in their decision making.

Scope

Compiled by a working group of SWAN members, this overview can be used in conjunction with 'Verges Doc 2: A guide to managing your verges for greater biodiversity' and the accompanying PowerPoint presentation.

Reason for managing verges differently: contribution of verges to wildlife survival

How glorious our roadside verges are at their best! Bursting with life, colour, shape and perfume. Imagine, not just how much joy they give us as we drive, cycle or walk by, but the hundreds of creatures that they provide food and shelter for which in turn builds resilience in the ecosystem. There are literally hundreds of wildflowers and grasses in our road verges but their variety has declined worryingly over the last few years. Wildlife continues to diminish.

Impact of different mowing regimes on wildlife

Cutting verges too early, too often or not at all reduces the number of wildflower species that grow. Wildflowers take approximately 6-8 weeks to flower and set seed but as each species works to a different timescale, it's important not to cut during the flowering season so as to support the varied lifecycles of wildflowers and species that rely on them. Regular management of verges is, however, essential. Without it 'tussock forming' grasses can quickly dominate, reducing species diversity' (PlantLife 2019).

Some people like verges to be mown frequently

Their arguments against having longer verges include that it looks scruffy and unkempt. However, a little untidiness is a small cost for stopping the devastating decline in nature. They might believe that long grass and flowers can be a health and safety concern if they make it difficult to see at junctions. This is easily managed by cutting verges close to junctions so that sight lines are unobstructed.

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Some examples of councils who mow with wildlife in mind include:

- Dorset County Council has worked in partnership with Butterfly Conservation to enable wildlife to flourish along the A354 Weymouth relief road. Recently, thousands of pyramidal orchids could be seen blooming alongside other wildflowers.
- Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has established eight miles of meadows alongside a motorway, saving £23,000 per year on mowing costs.
- Denbighshire County Council currently has 11 roadside nature reserves scattered across the county which contribute to 10.7 acres of wildflower meadow.

There are multiple benefits to mowing with wildlife in mind:

- Management costs are reduced longer term
- Nectar sugar resources for pollinators are maximised
- Biodiversity is improved and increased
- Essential wildlife corridors are provided so that creatures can move easily from place to place, creating healthier and resilient populations as there is a larger area in which to find food, and the separate communities of animals can breed and mix genetically.
- Air and noise quality improved
- Flooding risks reduced
- Drought tolerance increased
- More carbon stored in the ground

Imagine how dull and depressing a Warwickshire landscape would be without wildflowers, insects and other animals.

References:

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