

Wildlife Verges in East Sussex

Road verges cover a large area, amounting to over 212,000 hectares in Britain. Nationally, at least 30 nationally rare plant species are known to grow on them, and they are also an important habitat for reptiles, breeding birds, butterflies and bumble bees.

Road verges link habitats and act as vital corridors for wildlife. They represent a remnant of our native grassland which has suffered catastrophic losses over the last century. Since the 1940s, modern farming and forestry practices have eroded hedgerows, woods, ancient meadows and marsh from the landscape, but many verges have escaped these effects. These have become refuges for species which have all but disappeared from the wider countryside. Today, ancient hay meadow plants such as Dyer's Greenweed and Spiny Restharrow are likely to be more common on road verges than in their traditional habitat in East Sussex.

Road verges can act as buffers to some of the most impoverished areas like dual carriageways or intensively farmed fields. Combined with railways, they are the single most viewed habitat in the country, giving millions of people every day direct contact with the changing seasons and colours of the countryside. They also provide distinct local character to each region. When managed correctly, road verges can support remarkable diverse collections of species. Good management often involves doing less, allowing the verge to develop and plants to set seed before cutting takes place.

Traditionally verges were cut for hay, grazed or scythed by Parish Lengthmen. This sympathetic management encouraged a wealth of wildlife. Today road safety requires that most verges are regularly cut whilst plants are in flower. Modern flail mowers leave a mulch of cuttings on the ground which encourages 'weed' species. Often the back of the verge is cut infrequently which allows brambles and scrub to invade. The identification of Wildlife Verges helps to ensure sympathetic management is reintroduced to important verges where possible.

East Sussex County Council maintains a schedule of Wildlife Verges and where possible, these are managed to protect their wildlife interest. The database lists the location, wildlife interest and management recommendations for the scheduled verges, and the verges are marked with wildflower markers, unless there are health and safety and/or management issues why they should not be marked. Verges are included in the schedule for a variety of reasons which include rare and vulnerable wildlife, plant communities of conservation value, visually attractive seasonal flowers and verges that are particularly valued by local communities. There are currently 110 verges on the schedule covering over 33 km. These include three verges which support Spiked Rampion, a plant specifically protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act which is wholly confined to East Sussex.

When the scheme was first introduced in the mid 1990s, there was an officer dedicated to identifying and monitoring the verges, liaising with landowners over management and recruiting and coordinating a team of Verge Volunteers. Unfortunately, we no longer have the capacity or the resources to take such an active role in the management of Wildlife Verges. However, we do still maintain the schedule, and if there is sufficient evidence and support for a verge to be listed, and provided there are no health and safety, management or ownership issues why a verge cannot be scheduled, we are happy to consider new verges for inclusion on the list.

Further information

East Sussex Highways: [Wildlife Verges](#).