



Road verge management and biodiversity in Worcestershire



An information note for local communities

This information note answers some of the most frequently asked questions from members of the public about road verge management in Worcestershire, in particular regarding the approach to protecting and enhancing biodiversity (wildlife) on verges. Worcestershire County Council recognises the hugely important role that road verges can play in providing a home and source of food for wildlife, particularly small mammals and insects. Road verges are crucial linear corridors through our often intensively managed countryside and can provide a connection between larger wildlife areas such as nature reserves.

What are Roadside Verge Nature Reserves?

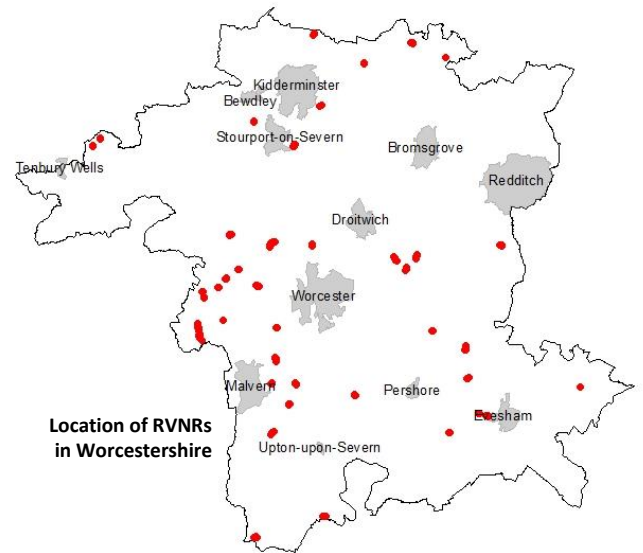
Worcestershire has a network of 42 Roadside Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs). Many are botanically-rich fragments of lowland hay meadow habitat. Potential RVNRs are surveyed and must meet certain criteria before being listed by the County Local Sites Partnership.

RVNRs are managed differently to other verges and responsibility for this falls to Worcestershire County Council's Countryside Service team, with the work being done by a specialist contractor. Most RVNRs are cut once a year in late summer after the flowers have set seed, in the manner of an old fashioned hay meadow. The cuttings are removed to maintain the low soil fertility levels which suit many wild flowers.

RVNRs are denoted by marker posts at each end. These are white with a red face on the inside edge and are there to identify the RVNR to other verge management contractors. Monitoring takes place on a 5-year rolling programme to ensure the ecological value is being maintained.

More information can be found at:

http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/info/20014/planning/1025/worcestershire_local_sites_partnership/2



Location of RVNRs in Worcestershire

RVNR marker post with Lady's Bedstraw *Galium verum* in foreground



Who is responsible for other road verges?

Verges on motorways and main trunk roads are the responsibility of Highways England. On other roads management is carried out by Worcestershire Highways and their contractors in rural areas and usually the District/City or Parish Council in urban areas and villages. The cutting of rural verges is contracted out to different individuals, often local landowners who commit to maintaining a certain length of verge or a certain geographical area with a prescribed number of cuts per year.

Around 8000km of verge are maintained in Worcestershire. Worcestershire Highways does not (usually) own the verges that it cuts: it has a legal duty to maintain the verge to protect road users and the highway and has right of access onto the verge to do so. In open countryside ownership usually lies with the owner of the field adjacent to the verge. In a village or urban setting householders should check their deeds to establish boundaries and rights of ownership. Trees growing within a roadside boundary hedge remain the responsibility of the landowner, although the Highways authority may take action if it believes a tree poses an immediate danger to road users, for example because of storm damage.

If an individual or a community wishes to plant anything on the verge, such as trees or flowers at the entrance to a village, they will require a licence to do so from Worcestershire Highways. The terms of this licence will commit that individual or community to maintaining that section of the verge themselves to a required standard.



Why are verges cut?

The first consideration for road verge managers is safety and visibility, not just for drivers, but also cyclists, horse riders and pedestrians. For this reason some areas of verge will always be kept short, such as visibility splays at junctions. The dimensions of a visibility splay are determined by the speed of traffic on the road being joined. On all other Worcestershire Highways maintained roads, where safety will not be compromised, only the first metre will be cut alongside the highway. On narrow verges these cuts may take up the whole width whereas on others there may be large areas of grass left behind the 1m visibility cut. These areas behind the 1m strip are now managed on a three year cycle and only after the wildflowers have had the opportunity to set seed.



As well as maintaining sightlines these 1m cuts prevent vegetation encroaching into the road that might force a road user into the centre of the carriageway. Uncut, decaying vegetation can also block drainage gullies and cause flooding, which is inconvenient to road users and is associated with carriageway deformation.

Why doesn't the council do more to maximise the biodiversity value of road verges?

Worcestershire County Council is committed to finding ways to enhance the biodiversity value of the road verge network, within the parameters described above for road safety and carriageway integrity. In particular, the Council recognises the potential of our road verges to provide habitat for pollinating insects. The logistics of timing grass cuts over 8000km of verge in order to allow all flowers to set seed is very difficult and the cost of removing and disposing of cut material from those verges to avoid over-enrichment would be significant. We are investigating possible solutions to these challenges in a small number of pilot projects across Worcestershire. For more information contact ecology@worcestershire.gov.uk.

What can Parish Councils do?

A lot of Parish Councils employ the services of a lengthsman or other contractor to carry out frequent amenity cuts throughout the season to keep verges tidy. This can be important within a village setting or on a main route to a school, shop, church, etc.; however there are often opportunities to allow verges to grow and flower, supporting pollinators and creating an attractive feature akin to a wildflower meadow. Please consider which areas in your parish could benefit from less intensive management. If in doubt contact Rob Deri, WCC Highway Engineer with responsibility for Green Assets (RDeri@worcestershire.gov.uk) and he can carry out a site visit to assess the options.

What can individuals and communities do to maximise habitat and food supply for pollinators and other wildlife?

- Aim to provide a year-round food supply by selecting a range of plants that flower at different times.
- Consider flower type and structure. Many pollinators cannot access narrow, tubular or ornamental flowers.
- Increase the species mix in hedgerows where this is appropriate to the local landscape. Hawthorn and blackthorn provide valuable early nectar: other flowering shrubs and trees include hedgerow fruit (damson, crab apple, cherry), rose and spindle. Honeysuckle, ivy and clematis are also good sources of nectar.
- If managing grassland for wildflowers it is important to remove all the cuttings and not leave them to mulch. Try to cut once a year in autumn, once all the flowers have set and dropped their seeds.
- Encourage people in your community to get involved in wildlife gardening initiatives such as Butterfly Conservation's 'Plant Pots for Pollinators' campaign (<http://butterfly-conservation.org/10759/plant-pots-for-pollinators.html>)
- Promote strips of wildflower habitat or rough grassland alongside green space in your community, e.g. churchyards, cemeteries, school fields and playing fields.
- Encourage gardeners and green space managers to re-consider their use of pesticides.
- Use the planning process to request that development in your locality accounts for the needs of pollinators within areas of grassland or landscape planting.

Further sources of information

www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/encourage-wildlife-to-your-garden/plants-for-pollinators

www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk/thingstodo/allyearround/nectar-cafe.aspx

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/pollinatorsconferences

