

Wildlife corridors - gardens, hedges and rural verges

Wildlife corridors are vital to the survival of our wildlife. The fragmentation of our countryside is a major cause of species loss and the reduction in biodiversity. We urgently need to recreate the connection between habitats which have become isolated.

Wildlife needs us to provide safe places in which they can hide, find food, breed, nurture their young and move to and fro or we will continue to lose species at an alarming rate. We all need to think of ways to help in our villages. Disconnected and isolated nature reserves are not enough.

Our gardens, as a collective, have the potential to form a network of little nature reserves, if we only share them a bit. In Britain, we are lucky, a large proportion of homes have access to a garden. We need to help nature to make homes in them and move through them. There is lots we can try: we can leave log piles and other scruffy areas which provide shelter and food and useful building materials.

We can do what Monty Don recommends and stop digging our beds, thereby not disrupting the soil life and allowing the insects, fungi and worms to enrich our soil. We can stop using pesticides. Birds and small mammals need insects to feed on in huge quantities: apparently a toad can eat up to 10,000 pests during the garden season and a swallow needs around 850 flying insects per day. We all benefit.

We can make our gardens much easier to pass through by leaving small hedgehog sized gaps under or in our fences to allow smaller mammals and amphibians to move between gardens more easily and find mates and escape predators.

The lack of wildlife corridors can lead to a desperate struggle for survival. For the toads on Woodhill Lane, Stroud Lane, Madgehole Lane and Lordshill trying to cross the road to breed in the ponds on the other side is a very big ask. Tarmac roads teeming with cars and vans are not the corridors toads and other amphibians need but fortunately for some there is a large team of volunteers, led by Regena Coult from the SGEG and Charlotte Gray, trying to help them make the journey safely.

Healthy hedges, along with their related habitats, such as ditches and banks and field margins, and biodiverse village verges rich in wildflowers and cover, also both function as wildlife corridors. They offer wildlife such as birds, insects, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians the opportunities they need to escape predators, find food and building materials and find a mate and breed successfully. It is important that the hedges are native mixed hedges, offering different food sources at different times of the year. To function as a corridor hedges must connect habitats such as woodland otherwise they are simply a hedge!

Since the second world war the UK has lost about half of our hedgerows and 130 key species that depend on hedgerows are now at risk of extinction, so hedgerows need to be looked after and restored. Looking after wildlife hedges, and trying to keep them thick at the bottom, is hard work and time consuming. 93% of Surrey's remaining hedges are in poor condition.

Surrey Wildlife Trust aim to plant, protect and restore an 80 kilometre stretch of hedges along the North Downs with the help of thousands of local people including landowners, farmers, school children, volunteers and local hedge laying societies. This will provide a wonderful corridor for wildlife and help rebuild the connectivity which has been lost. We in Shamley Green can also look to improve our hedges.

Turning to rural road verges, according to Plantlife, there are nearly 313,500 miles of rural road verge in the UK but they too have been mown and sprayed into submission in recent years. Maintaining rural verges requires thought. Species richness cannot be achieved by using chemicals and constant mowing.

Glynis Drummond and Alison Harding from the SGEG asked long standing residents to remember wild flowers which used to be widespread. The SGEG is hoping that the proposed changes in the mowing regime might result in a reappearance of some of them. As an initial stage the Parish Council is to adjust the frequency and heights of mowing of verges and commons in the village this year. Some areas are going to be left longer than others to allow plants to spread their seed in summer. Mowing changes are very much a work in progress but it's hoped that people will understand and appreciate the reasons behind this. Also it is hoped that we can come up with a plan to give nature a helping hand by trial replanting of wildflowers in some suitable locations.

If verges are encouraged to be biodiverse, rich in native wildflowers and scrub and well connected they will support more wildlife. An abundance of wildflowers leads to an abundance of insects, which in turn contributes to an increase in birdlife. The better connected they are, from one village to the next, the more the species will be able to move freely. The verges in turn will provide better ecosystem services such as air quality, pollination and water management and be more resilient to environmental change.

Hopefully Shamley Green along with other villages can help to restore our corridors and provide a rich biodiverse environment for our wildlife.

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