

Caring for Westmorland and Furness' Roadside Verges

Wilder in appearance, wilder in nature

The sides of Westmorland and Furness' roads are home to hundreds of species of wild plants and animals.

Recognised as a valuable resource for biodiversity, roadside verges can also bring great pleasure and delight, helping us connect with nature on our journeys wherever we go and acting as important corridors to connect one habitat to another for species.

This leaflet explains how by working together, we can balance the necessary road safety and maintenance requirements, with sensitive ongoing management to help biodiversity on our roadside verges thrive.



Cumbria
Wildlife Trust



Within Westmorland and Furness there are nearly 450 miles (approximately 700km) of roadside verges. These range in altitude up to over 600m (2,000ft). This represents an incredible resource for our wildlife. These linear verge networks also help connect habitats and green spaces, enabling species to move freely across our landscape.

Why are roadside verges important?

Managed sensitively, road verges can support an astonishing amount of native flora and fauna. According to Plantlife, more pollinators are found on well-managed verges than neighbouring countryside, and 45% of our total flora is found on verges.

Here in Westmorland and Furness, a wide range of wildflowers and plants have been recorded on our roadside verges. Insects, small mammals and birds also thrive on the resources that roadside verges offer. They all contribute to Westmorland and Furness' rich biodiversity, and sections of verge containing unusual or protected species are designated as 'Special Verges'.

Many verges in Westmorland and Furness are grasslands, which provide strongholds for old hay meadow species that have been largely lost from our fields. Other verges include woodland, wetland, scrub and bank habitats, with their adjacent ditches, hedges and walls.

This variety of habitat supports a rich diversity of life, enabling wildlife to not only feed but also breed and take refuge. Insects, especially bees and butterflies, are particularly abundant on wildflower-rich verges. Undisturbed habitats including tall grassland, wetland, hedgerow and scrub provide important breeding and overwintering grounds for a wide variety of insects, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds.

All verges are an important part of the landscape, forming wildlife corridors. They can link areas of wildlife-rich habitat together, and when managed well, and can help provide a vital nature recovery network for species in decline.

Did you know?

Many of our best-loved butterflies, moths, hoverflies and beetles depend on the native plants that grow in our roadside verges to raise their young as caterpillars, or larvae.

Wild flowers thrive in poor soils, and don't need fertiliser or compost; this is one of the reasons why they grow on roadside verges.

As well as wild flowers, plants including bramble, dock, and nettle are hugely important. Without these native food plants in our landscape, many of our pollinators and other insects would struggle to survive.



Who looks after Westmorland and Furness' road verges?

Westmorland and Furness Council manages the majority of road verges throughout the area. The grass is cut to ensure there is good visibility for road users so that they can use the roads safely, whilst taking into account environmental and conservation considerations to ensure that the wild flora and fauna are protected. The council is committed to managing its work in an environmentally friendly way, and works with Cumbria Wildlife Trust to survey and monitor verges, including 'Special Verges'.

National Highways is responsible for the main trunk roads including the M6, A66, A590 and part of the A595 within Cumbria. National Highways undertakes maintenance and safety cuts of the verges on these roads throughout the year. Government funding to promote biodiversity has enabled National Highways to work with Cumbria Wildlife Trust and others to restore verge habitats to bring them back into condition and manage them into the future.

Cumbria Wildlife Trust works closely with both Westmorland and Furness Council and National Highways on a variety of projects to help increase biodiversity on roadside verges, and create opportunities for volunteers and communities to be involved.

By working in collaboration, best practice approaches are shared across the area, so that when, where and how road verges are maintained in Westmorland and Furness is in line with best practice guidance developed by Plantlife.

Parish councils are responsible for cutting and managing verges in some Cumbrian communities where responsibility has been devolved.

Farmers play an important role in the management of field edges, of which roadside verges are an integral part. Boundaries and adjacent land may include walls, banks and ditches. Sensitive management ensures that these important wildlife habitats are maintained in good condition. Allowing thick hedges to flower and fruit provides birds with nest sites and winter food. Uncut hedges also provide essential shelter for overwintering insects and their larval young. Rotational management can help support this.

Some species of verge that support a very good range of species or contain rare plants and are identified as Special Verges. Special care is given to protect and monitor their condition.



Yellow rattle
Credit Tanya St. Pierre

Caring for Westmorland and Furness' Roadside Verges

The map shows the amount of special verges across the length and breadth of country road verges in Westmorland and Furness.

Did you know?



In 2023, the Cumbria Local Nature Partnership developed **Cumbria's Plan Bee**.



The Plan is a pollinator action plan for Cumbria which identifies a number of priority actions for councils, communities, farmers, landowners and businesses to take forward to help our native insect pollinators.



How can farmers help?

If you are a farmer, land owner or estate manager you can play a key role in helping to protect the flora and fauna in roadside verges:

- Only cut verges when necessary. Removing arisings (grass clippings) will help increase the wildlife value of verges.
- Leave a 1m uncut strip along a boundary/hedge edge to provide refuge for wildlife.
- Avoid cutting all your hedgerows at once. Consider a 3–5 year rotation to allow flowers and berries to grow in alternate sections.
- Avoid or reduce the use of herbicides (spot spray only).
- Avoid driving on verges, especially in wet conditions when machinery may rut the verge.
- Take a late crop of hay from wider verges.
- Early cuts may look tidy, but provide poor habitat for wildlife.



Orange tip butterfly image Ryan Clark

How can parish councils help?

Where the roadside verge is maintained by the parish council and not the highway authority the following will help:

- Removing grass clippings (arisings), helps reduce soil fertility and prevent the accumulation of thatch. By including a 'cut and collect' regime within your parish grass maintenance schedule, you will help to provide conditions for a wider range of native wild flowers and plants to grow.
- Let grass verges grow between late April and late July–early October, as this allows many native wild flower and grass species to flower and set seed. Mown paths and safety strips for sightlines and visibility splays, will not only ensure safety but also keep these verges looking tidy and cared for.
- Allow native hedgerow flora species to thrive by leaving a 50cm–1m wide strip uncut along boundary edges. Cut and remove arisings every 3 years to prevent competitive species dominating.
- If you wish to create a planting scheme – or enhance verges, look to add native local provenance seed or plant species where possible, rather than non-natives, as these species better support wildlife. Better still, encourage native species already present to flourish.
- Tolerate native weeds such as nettles, ivy and brambles. As well as being important food plants, they also provide refuge for a wide range of insects and other wildlife in various stages of their life cycles. Cut back hard in late winter or once temperatures reach a constant 10°C and insects are out of hibernation.
- Woody stems also provide refuge for insects that crawl inside so cutting back hard in this way can also be beneficial to wildlife.

How can you help to conserve our roadside verges?

- Avoid driving on verges. This kills plants and damages soil structure.
- Take an interest in the wild flowers and plants growing in your local verges, and talk to others about what you see.
- Although it may seem like a helpful and well intended thing to do, please do not plant bulbs or other plants on roadside verges. It is an offence to plant or allow the spread of cultivated plants into the wild.
- Similarly, please do not remove any plants from verges e.g. for vases at home, or try to dig up flowers to put in your garden.



Common carder bumblebee image Ryan Clark

Why are verges cut at different times?

Every verge managed by Westmorland and Furness Council is maintained under a cutting programme. It is vital that roadside verges are managed for safety so that road users and pedestrians can:

- See around bends.
- See traffic signs clearly.
- Step off the road when vehicles pass.
- Have safe access for breakdowns.

The council also plans the timing of the verge cut to help protect the wildflowers on the verge. Some verges are cut early in the year, some in July, August, September or October. This will allow the plants to flower and set seed, whilst also maintaining safety.

- Verges with species-rich grassland are generally cut later in the year.
- Other types of verges may need an earlier cut.
- Every four years, a full-width cut is taken later in the year to prevent woody weeds and saplings growing in grassland areas, as these can shade out more delicate flowers. The full-width cut is mainly for scrub control to protect the fabric of the road, but also protects the flower-richness.

In order to maintain a safe and wildlife-rich road network, contractors work from maps showing which verges to cut and when. This work is assessed and monitored, and cutting times are revised if necessary.

Contacts

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Orchids on a roadside verge near Garrigil village, Cumbria.

Credit ©NPAP/Rebecca Barrett



Credit Ryan Clark.