

Caring for Cumbria's Roadside Verges

Not so
tidy, but full
of life

The sides of Cumbria's roads are home to hundreds of species of wild plants and animals.

Recognised as a valuable resource for wildlife, roadside verges can also bring great pleasure and delight, helping us connect with nature on our journeys wherever we go.

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



Within Cumbria there are nearly 450 miles (approximately 700km) of roadside verges. These range in altitude from sea level in the west to over 600m (2,000ft) in the east. This represents an incredible resource for our wildlife. These linear verge networks also help connect habitats and green spaces, enabling species to more 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 Cumbria, 500 species of wild flower have been recorded on our Cumbria's roadside verges. Insects, small mammals and birdlife also thrive on our roadside verges. They all contribute to Cumbria's rich biodiversity, and sections of verge containing unusual or protected species are designated as 'Special Verges'.

Many verges in Cumbria 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.



Who looks after Cumbria's road verges?

Cumbria County Council manages the majority of road verges throughout Cumbria. The grass is cut to ensure that people can use the roads safely, whilst taking into account environmental and conservation considerations to ensure that the wild flora and fauna are protected. Since the mid-1990s the council has set out to manage its work in an environmentally friendly way, and has previously worked 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 has joined forces and worked closely with both Cumbria County Council and National Highways on a variety of projects over the years 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 county, so that when, where and how road verges are maintained in Cumbria is in line with best practice guidance developed by Plantlife.

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.

Parish councils are responsible for cutting and managing verges in some Cumbrian communities where responsibility has been devolved. For example, in Lorton, northwest Cumbria, the parish council has set up a wildflower verge project to support local wildlife and create wildflower-rich grassland areas that contain native Cumbrian hay meadow species.

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. **Farming and the Public Highway (cumbria.gov.uk)**

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.

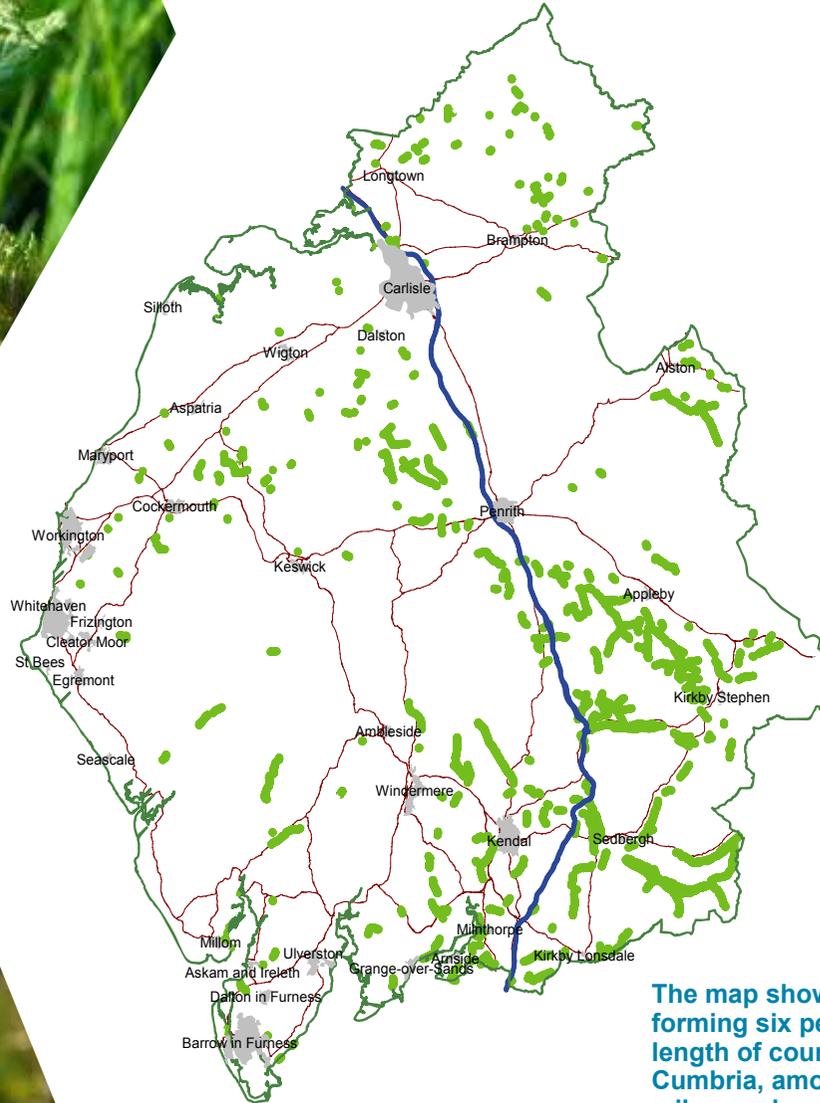
Caring for Cumbria's Roadside Verges



Yellow rattle



Peacock butterfly on devil's-bit scabious



The map shows special verges forming six per cent of the total length of country road verges in Cumbria, amounting to over 400 miles, and covering approximately 500 acres.



Nearly 500 species of wildflower have been recorded on Cumbria's roadside verges.



There are approximately 700km (nearly 450 miles) of roadside verges in Cumbria, ranging from sea level in the west to over 600m (2,000 feet) in the east.



Special verges



Melancholy thistle



Wood crane's-bill



Since 2001, over 360 verges have been surveyed around the county by volunteers and Cumbria Wildlife Trust staff

How can farmers help?

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

- Only cut verges when necessary. Removing arisings 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 (**See Farming and the Public Highway Leaflet**).

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 on the wing.

How can you help to conserve Cumbria's 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 public-spirited thing to do, please don't plant bulbs or other plants on roadside verges. It is an offence to plant or allow the spread of cultivated plants into the wild.
- It is the county council's responsibility to maintain the majority of verges across Cumbria. So get in touch with the council if you – or a local group wish to 'adopt' a verge.



Common carder bumblebee image Ryan Clark

Why are verges cut at different times?

Every verge managed by Cumbria County 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 county 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.

- Flower-rich verges are generally cut later in the year.
- Other types of verges may need an earlier cut.
- Every four years, take a full-width cut 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.

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*Orchids on a roadside verge near
Garrigil village, Cumbria.*
Credit ©NPAP/Rebecca Barrett



Credit Ryan Clark.