



WILDFLOWER VERGE PROJECT



Desford, Hunts Lane Verge Survey and Management Recommendations

The verge on Hunts Lane in Desford is included in the County Council's Wildflower Verge Project and is being managed by the Parish Council, with support from local residents, to help improve local wildlife habitat and to raise awareness about the importance of biodiversity.

In 2024, the verge area was expanded and a resurvey was carried out by NatureSpot, who are supporting the project by carrying out ecological surveys of each new verge, meeting parish council representatives and local residents, and by providing a report of the survey findings together with management recommendations.

NatureSpot also promotes every verge as a featured Wild Place on its award-winning website, which describes the project, lists all the species recorded during the survey, together with a selection of images. NatureSpot also invites local residents to contribute their own records of wildlife sightings on the verge which will then also appear on the feature page. Parish councils are encouraged to publicise the page link below as a way of informing local residents about the project and raising awareness of the wildlife found on the verge. The page can be viewed using the link below and can also be found using the Wild Place drop-down menu on the NatureSpot home page.

[www.naturespot.org.uk/Desford Hunts Lane verge](http://www.naturespot.org.uk/Desford_Hunts_Lane_verge)

There is also a feature page for the wider parish which includes links to all the Wild Places in the area.

www.naturespot.org.uk/desford

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The verge surveys are primarily focussed on the grasses and wildflowers found growing on the verge, though casual sightings of other wildlife may also be recorded. It is important to identify the grass and wildflower species already present in order to assess the quality of the grassland habitat before deciding on ongoing management.

Where a hedge and is present at the back of the verge, or when individual trees are present, these species are included in the survey as they generally add to the wildlife value. The shade and shelter they provide often supports species of plants and animals that prefer these conditions, adding to the overall diversity.

The species list in **appendix 1** includes all the plants and animals identified during the latest survey. Any species that are used as indicators when assessing Local Wildlife Site designation are highlighted in green for interest. These species, plus other desirable meadow plant species, are given a score that enables the verge as a whole to be rated as to its current quality as meadow grassland and this can help to identify appropriate management recommendations.

It is important to note that the meadow score and quality rating only refers to the plant composition and not the overall biodiversity value of the verge. All verges left to grow provide excellent wildlife habitat compared to the short-mown alternative (see Appendix 2).

All species records from the survey have been submitted through NatureSpot's website. The records now form part of the Leicestershire and Rutland species database and are shared with local and national recording schemes, the Leicestershire and Rutland Environmental Records Centre and the National Biodiversity Network. This data is vital in helping to understand the rarity status of each species, where it is distributed across the county and how this may be changing over time.

SURVEY DATE

The survey of this verge was carried on on 14th June by David Nicholls (NatureSpot) and was attended by a representative of Desford Parish Council and around 10 local residents.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The verge lies along the northern edge of Hunts Lane at the edge of Desford, stretching from near to the cemetery towards the roundabout. The expansion in 2024 has added around 50% to the length. It varies in width from between 1-3m and is backed by a native managed hedge which includes Hawthorn, Elder and Holly. Two medium-sized Small-leaved Lime trees grow near the centre of the verge area. An arable field lies beyond the hedge. The pedestrian pathway alongside the verge is further separated from the road by a mown grass strip which is approximately 1m wide.

It is understood that two packets of meadow seed were scattered on the verge in the Autumn of 2023, one was of cornfield annuals and the other a perennial wildflower mix. From this seed, the only plant that appears to have established is Corncockle, which has grown in an extensive stand along the western half of the verge, rather swamping much of the original plant diversity.

The 2024 survey recorded 41 plant species in the verge and hedge. Of these, five are notable as indicator species when Local Wildlife Sites are being designated: Meadow Buttercup, Bulbous Buttercup, Lady's smock, Oxeye Daisy and Yellow Rattle. The verge has been given an overall quality score of 19 from 13 different wildflower and grass species which are typical of quality meadow grassland, indicating that it has the basis to become a very good, and plant diverse, habitat.

Yellow Rattle was introduced from seed 2-3 years ago and has become firmly established in the central part of the verge. This section is also one of the richest areas in terms of plant diversity, no doubt helped by the Yellow Rattle reducing the dominance of the grasses.

Inevitably a few species seen in previous surveys were not refound (Yarrow and Hairy Tare), though this does not mean they aren't still there! Interestingly, the adjacent mown verge which borders the road has Yarrow, Red Clover and Meadow Barley growing there – all of which are quality meadow species. Over time these will hopefully colonise into the unmown verge!

SURVEY SUMMARY

Floral diversity: **41 species**

Local Wildlife Site indicator species: **5**

Meadow quality species score: **19 (13 species)**

Meadow quality: **Good**

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The extended verge should be managed exactly the same as the area it now adjoins, that is not mowing from April to August then cutting the area short in September and removing the cuttings.

Any further seed sowing should be avoided, especially of annual plants as these are not found in established meadow grassland. The Corncockle currently growing in numbers will diminish next year and will probably disappear within a couple of years. It is possible that some of the sown perennial seeds sown last year will produce flowering plants next year as they often require two years to fully establish.

It would help to collect some of the Yellow Rattle seeds (in early July) and spread these to other areas of the verge.

If desired, a few selected wildflowers could be introduced and this is best done with plug plants. Appendix 2 suggests a few species that are generally suitable. One of the residents (Hugh) has Meadow Cranesbill in his garden which was grown from seed from a nearby verge so this would be a suitable addition. Plant these in Autumn, after the September cut. It is best to only add a few plants and if successful these will then naturally spread.

If possible, a further expansion of the verge (or other area) should be considered. Even reducing the mowing frequency will bring valuable wildlife benefits. Many species can flower in a relatively short time so a gap of 6-8 weeks between cuts would be very helpful in supporting local wildlife.

Appendix 2 describes management tips and guidance in more detail.

FURTHER HELP

If you would like any help or advice with managing your verge then please contact:

Roseanna Burton, Leicestershire County Council: Roseanna.Burton@leics.gov.uk

David Nicholls, NatureSpot: dnicholls@naturespot.org.uk

Appendix 1 – species recorded during the survey

Any highlighted in dark green are notable as indicator species for Local Wildlife Sites and those in light green are other quality meadow species.

Abundance key: Dominant (D), Abundant (A), Frequent (F), Occasional (O), Rare (R)

Species	Common name	Group	Abundance	Score
<i>Agrostemma githago</i>	Corncockle	Wildflowers	A	0
<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	Cow Parsley	Wildflowers	O	0
<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	Mugwort	Wildflowers	R	0
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy	Wildflowers	O	1
<i>Calystegia sepium</i>	Hedge Bindweed	Wildflowers	F	0
<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Cuckooflower	Wildflowers	R	2
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	Common Mouse-ear	Wildflowers	O	1
<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Spear Thistle	Wildflowers	R	0
<i>Dioscorea communis</i>	Black Bryony	Wildflowers	R	0
<i>Galium aparine</i>	Cleavers	Wildflowers	F	0
<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed	Wildflowers	O	0
<i>Jacobaea vulgaris</i>	Common Ragwort	Wildflowers	O	0
<i>Lamium album</i>	White Dead-nettle	Wildflowers	R	0
<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	Oxeye Daisy	Wildflowers	R	2
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	Ribwort Plantain	Wildflowers	F	1
<i>Potentilla reptans</i>	Creeping Cinquefoil	Wildflowers	F	0
<i>Ranunculus acris</i>	Meadow Buttercup	Wildflowers	O	2
<i>Ranunculus bulbosus</i>	Bulbous Buttercup	Wildflowers	R	2
<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Creeping Buttercup	Wildflowers	O	0
<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Yellow-rattle	Wildflowers	F	2
<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>	Broad-leaved Dock	Wildflowers	R	0
<i>Scorzoneroideis autumnalis</i>	Autumn Hawkbit	Wildflowers	O	2
<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.	Dandelion	Wildflowers	F	0
<i>Trifolium dubium</i>	Lesser Trefoil	Wildflowers	O	0
<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White Clover	Wildflowers	R	1
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Common Nettle	Wildflowers	F	0
<i>Alopecurus pratensis</i>	Meadow Foxtail	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	O	1
<i>Arrhenatherum elatius</i>	False Oat-grass	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	F	0
<i>Bromus hordeaceus</i>	Soft-brome	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	O	0
<i>Bromus sterilis</i>	Barren Brome	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	O	0
<i>Cynosurus cristatus</i>	Crested Dog's-tail	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	R	1
<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>	Cock's-foot	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	F	0
<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Yorkshire-fog	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	O	0
<i>Lolium perenne</i>	Perennial Rye-grass	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	O	0
<i>Poa trivialis</i>	Rough Meadow-grass	Grasses, Rushes & Sedges	F	1
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Hawthorn	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		
<i>Hedera helix</i>	Ivy	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		
<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	Holly	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg.	Bramble	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		

<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	Elder	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		
<i>Tilia cordata</i>	Small-leaved Lime	Trees, Shrubs & Climbers		
<i>Chloromyia formosa</i>	Broad Centurion	Flies		
<i>Scathophaga stercoraria</i>	Yellow Dung Fly	Flies		
<i>Oedemera nobilis</i>	Swollen-thighed Beetle	Beetles		

Appendix 2 - Management of Verges

VERGES AS WILDLIFE HABITAT

Grassland road verges represent a habitat that has suffered a devastating decline over the last century. 98% of traditional wildflower meadows have disappeared in Britain so the plants and animals that rely on this habitat have very few places left where they can thrive. Road verges, if appropriately managed, can help to reverse this trend and make an important contribution to supporting local biodiversity.

Regularly mown grassland offers very little to wildlife. Few plants are able to flower so there is little food for nectar-feeding insects such as bees and butterflies. The exposed ground dries out creating a very inhospitable environment for most invertebrates. Without these creatures the food chain collapses so there are fewer birds and mammals, such as hedgehogs.

The answer is simple, allow the grassland verge to grow. Taller vegetation offers cover, feeding opportunities and a range of micro-habitats that are not available in regularly mown grass. In addition, many more plants can flower and offer nectar to pollinators such as bees and butterflies.

In general, the more species of grasses and wildflowers that grow in the verge, the better it is for wildlife. Many insect species are specialised to feed on just one or two types of plant so the more diverse the flora the more wildlife it supports. The verge surveys have shown that in most cases there is a surprisingly diverse flora already present. By simply allowing the verge flora to grow during the Spring and Summer they will produce a valuable wildlife-rich grassland habitat.

APPRECIATE WHAT YOU HAVE

Most verges have an underlying soil that has a high nutrient level. Indeed, nitrification of land is a widespread UK problem due to air-borne deposits originating from the nitrogen in traffic exhausts and from agricultural applications. A high nutrient level enables some plants to grow to a large size which then outcompete many smaller flowers and grasses. Whilst this reduces floral diversity, many of these dominant species, such as Hogweed, Cow Parsley, Nettles and False Oat-grass, are valuable wildlife plants in their own right. It is important to appreciate that the plants growing on a verge are generally those that are best suited to the conditions and the overall plant community largely represents what is natural for that site. Attempts to radically change this generally end in failure, without the considerable and ongoing input of time and expense. It is therefore cheaper and more sustainable to work with what you have and not try to create a man-made landscape by reseeding the whole verge. As nearly all verges have a more diverse and interesting plant and animal diversity than generally realised, it is ultimately much more satisfying to watch nature at work!

MOWING REGIME

If left completely unmanaged, most verges would gradually evolve from grassland into scrub-woodland due to natural ecological succession. Whilst rewilding can be a good thing, meadow grassland is in short supply and generally more appropriate along busy roads. To maintain, and eventually improve the grassland habitat, the most important action is to **stop mowing between April and August** (allowing the plants to grow, flower and set seed), **then in September to cut it short and remove the cuttings** (the cuttings can be left for a few days to dry and drop any remaining seeds but this isn't crucial).

Many mowing machines will struggle to cut long vegetation so a strimmer or a reciprocating blade mower is probably needed. Traditionally meadows were cut by hand with a scythe so this could be an option if anyone is keen to learn this skill.

Whilst an annual cut will help the plant diversity it does deprive other wildlife of important cover and over-wintering sites. The ideal solution is therefore to leave a part of the verge as taller vegetation, then

alternating this uncut area the following year. It is best to leave the uncut section at the rear of the verge. If there is a hedge or ditch present then this will serve as a winter refuge and you can cut all of the verge.

REMOVING THE CUTTINGS

Removing the cuttings is vital to prevent the build up of a mat of dried stems, which will smother the smaller plants, and it will also enrich the soil as it gradually decomposes, the opposite of what is desirable! It has been demonstrated that by removing the cuttings, the soil fertility will gradually fall and a wider range of flower and grass species will naturally develop, though this change happens over several years.

Disposing of the cut vegetation can be a challenge. Once dry it is effectively hay* so is ideal food and bedding for horses, rabbits and other pets. Local residents with these animals may be keen to collect the hay from the verge, especially if raked into a convenient pile. Failing this it can be composted simply by piling it into a heap. It is unlikely that the verge itself will be suitable for this so it is probably necessary to find a suitable site nearby. Allotment societies may be happy to accept it as they probably already have a large compost heap. The cuttings can also be taken to your nearest Waste and Recycling Site for treatment as 'green waste'.

*Note: if the verge contains Ragwort, it may be worth hand-pulling these before cutting so they do not get mixed into the hay.

TO SEED OR NOT TO SEED?

Whilst it may be possible to add more floral diversity through seeding and/or plug planting, this is an expensive and labour-intensive process that is not guaranteed to work. Many species added artificially tend not to thrive and, in many cases, disappear within 2-3 years. **The most cost effective, sustainable and generally most successful way to improve grassland habitat for wildlife is simply to change the mowing regime and let nature do the rest.**

If seeding is desirable, care should be taken to source the seed from a reputable source with a mix of native wildflowers and grasses suitable for the soil. We recommend using Emorsgate's [EM2 meadow mix](#) (4g per sq metre). To add some first year colour, mix in seed from the [EC1 cornfield mix](#) (2g per sq metre). Note that the cornfield species are annuals and will largely disappear after flowering in year 1, to be replaced by the perennials in the main EM2 mix so may not be worth the investment.

To prepare the ground for seeding, the verge should be mown, then scarified (partially disturbed to expose some bare soil). This can be done by vigorous raking. However, it is usually best to only seed a few areas of the verge. This is cheaper, requires less effort to prepare the ground and will enable successful plants to spread naturally. Chemical herbicides should not be used. Seeding should take place in Autumn as many seeds require the cold chill of winter to mature ready for germination in the Spring.

Yellow Rattle is generally desirable as it parasitises grasses so they weaken and become less dominant, leaving space for more wildflowers. This species isn't included in the seed mix so is best obtained separately. Preferably, harvest the seed locally if there is a known population and the land-owner agrees. Yellow Rattle needs to be sown fresh in Autumn as it needs cold exposure to germinate. It doesn't usually do well as a plug plant because it needs grasses to feed on as it grows. Prepare the ground as described above.

Green Hay is another option and a much better way of adding more plant diversity. If there is a quality hay meadow near to you, ask the farmer/land-owner if you can have a small quantity of the cuttings before being dried and baled. These cuttings will contain seed from the meadow plants which will be dropped as the vegetation dries out. Thinly spreading the 'green' hay on your verge should add seed with local genetic

provenance – far preferable to buying seed from a commercial supplier where the genetic varieties included are not usually local.

PLUG PLANTS

An alternative to seeding is to plant 'plugs' of pre-grown wildflower seedlings into a small bare area of the verge in Spring. This can be easier and more effective than sowing seed. Black Knapweed, Lady's Bedstraw, Meadow Buttercup, Bulbous Buttercup, Ox-eye Daisy, Meadow Cranesbill and Bird's-foot Trefoil are all relatively easy to establish as plug plants.

BULBS

There are hardly any native meadow species that grow from bulbs and it is generally not appropriate to plant any bulbs in the verges. Daffodils, Hyacinths and the like are garden plants and do not have a place in a wildflower meadow.