

Exploring a Hedgerow

In Ireland, we're lucky to have some of the best hedgerows in the world. They provide shelter and privacy, stop farm animals from straying and mark out property boundaries. However, hedgerows are also very important for wild animals, birds and plants. Unfortunately many of our hedgerows are being destroyed to make way for new houses, buildings, roads and car parks. It is important that we protect as many of the old hedgerows as possible and plant some new ones. It is also important to learn about hedgerows and how valuable they are.



Some Irish hedgerows are very old, maybe eight or nine hundred years old. Others are very young, and many people can remember a hedgerow being planted. However, most hedgerows in the countryside were planted about two or three hundred years ago as this was the time when a lot of our land was first divided up into fields. Finding out the age of a hedgerow is not easy. If the hedgerow is very large and there are old trees in it, then it's obviously not young. There may be old maps or books in your local library or online that can help you trace when the hedgerow was planted. Talking to older people in the area may also give you some clues. Your County Council office may also be able to help.

Before your field trip

Useful equipment:

- Measuring tape
- Notebook and pencil
- Small bag or basket to bring back samples of plants (Try to avoid plastic bags as sometimes things go soggy in plastic)
- Digital camera (Taking a picture of something is always better than collecting a sample)
- Hand lens or magnifying glass
- Binoculars (These are useful for looking at the leaves on tall trees as well as helping to identify birds and animals)
- A pooter or bug-catcher (With this you can suck an insect into a clear plastic container without damaging it and release it unharmed after it has been identified or photographed)

Field trip check list:

When is the best time to go on my hedgerow field trip?
Which hedgerow am I going to explore?
How will I get there?
Is the weather suitable for the field trip?
Am I wearing appropriate clothes (coat, rain gear etc.) for the trip?
Do I have all the equipment I need?
Are there safety issues which could arise during the trip that I should consider?
Have I thought about how I should respect the countryside when on the field trip?

Questions to prepare

During your field trip, you will find out lots of interesting things about hedgerows.
What questions do you have about hedgerows which you would like to answer?

Can you predict the answers to some of your questions before you set out on your trip?

During your field trip

In the first part of the field trip, you will need to look closely at the hedgerow and observe as many interesting things as you can.

In the second part of the trip, you can do a number of activities to find out more about the hedgerow. The 'Activities' section in this guide will give you some ideas.

Look and Explore**1. Hedgerow Plants**

In ancient times, Ireland was covered in forest. When most of this forest was cut down, the plants and animals that used to live there had to survive in hedgerows.

We'll start by looking at some common types of hedgerow plants. We'll divide this into three different kinds of plant: hedgerow trees, shrubs and climbers, and small plants and wildflowers.

Hedgerow Trees

The kind of trees that are found in a hedgerow depends on many things, including the type of soil and the kind of trees the person who planted the hedgerow liked best. It's also important to know which trees are native Irish trees and which trees are non-native (brought in by people from foreign countries). Native trees are nearly always better for wildlife.

Look for:

Ash (native)



Holly (native)



Elder (native)



Hawthorn (native)



Beech (non-native)



Hazel (native)



Sycamore (non-native)



Oak (native)

**Shrubs and Climbers**

A shrub is really just a small tree. However, unlike a tree, a shrub is more likely to have many stems rather than a single trunk. Climbing plants use trees and shrubs for support as they climb up along the trees and shrubs to get more light to help them grow.

Look for:

Wild rose (shrub)



Bramble or blackberry (shrub)



Ivy (climber)



Wild honeysuckle or woodbine (climber)



Small Plants and Wildflowers

Some plants have different names in different parts of the country. For example, in Leinster, cow parsley is often called 'devil's porridge'. But the names here are the ones most commonly used.

Look for:

Primrose



Herb Robert



Lords and ladies



Hart's tongue fern



Wild strawberry



2. Hedgerow Birds

Many different types of birds live in hedgerows. However, some birds are quite shy and you have to keep very quiet to see them. Listed below a few of the more common birds you might see. You may also see a bird's nest!

Look for:

Robin



Blackbird



Wood pigeon



Dunnock



Magpie



Nest



Exploring Hedgerow Animals

Hedgerow animals are even shyer than the birds, and some of them only come out at night. However, keep an eye out for things like mouse holes or rabbit burrows. The more common hedgerow animals are listed below.

Look for:

Hedgehog



Wood mouse



Grey squirrel



Rabbit



Exploring Hedgerow Insects and Other Creepy-Crawlies

Insects are much easier to spot than hedgerow birds and animals. There are many different kinds of insects that you'll come across in and around a hedgerow, including different kinds of butterflies, ladybirds and earwigs. However, not all the creepy crawlies you find will be insects. Slugs and snails are not insects, neither are spiders, centipedes or woodlice (sometimes called slaters).

It is often difficult even for experts to identify exactly what kind of insect they're looking at and some of them don't have English names. So all you need to do is give the family name which the creepy-crawly belongs to (for example: 'butterfly', 'beetle', 'spider', 'slug').

Ladybird



Speckled wood butterfly



Spider



Activities

Pick a length of hedgerow and measure it. One hundred metres is a good length. Mark each end of your length of hedgerow as you will need to identify things between the markers.

First make a note of the area around the hedgerow. Does it divide two fields, is it beside a road or is it around a school playground or a public park? Note also whether it has a wire fence, a wall or a bank in it.

Can you guess the age of the hedgerow? You should use the suggestions in the section 'Learning about Hedgerows'. Is there anything you know about the history of this hedgerow?

Now it's time to start finding out what lives in your 100 metre section. Use the headings in the 'Look and Explore' section to help you. If you find something you don't recognise, either take a photograph of it or, if it's a plant, you could take a small sample of a leaf. You can bring this sample back to school where you can use books or the internet to try and find out what it is. Remember not to pick any wildflowers.



Extension activity:

Once you have studied one hedgerow, you may also choose to study a second hedgerow in a different location in order to compare them. You can compare the different plants, birds, animals and insects which you find in each of the hedgerows. You can also examine the differences in size, shape, age and the area surrounding the two hedgerows.

Remember, if you are comparing different hedgerows, you will need to study both hedgerows at the same time of the year. Your findings in a hedgerow will change according to the time of year.

After your field trip

Hedgerow Report

You have learned a lot more about the size, the shape and the age of hedgerows. You have also found out about the different plants, animals, birds and insects that live in the hedgerow you explored.

By creating a report on what you did and what you found, you will also be able to use it in the future for examining changes in the hedgerow at a different times during the year.

The photographs or drawings you have from your field trip will be very useful for illustrating your report.



Focus: Environmental awareness and care

Question:

What can we do to protect our hedgerows?

Suggestions:

- Replace lost hedgerows with new ones.
- Hedgerows should always be trimmed in winter when the plants are not growing and the birds are not nesting.
- When a hedge is trimmed, it's best to leave a few trees to grow up tall.

Hedgerows are often best for wildlife if they're left alone. However, sometimes they have to be trimmed to make them thicker or so that drivers can see around bends in a road.



Project: Planning your own Hedgerow

Every year hedgerows are destroyed. This is often for good reasons such as widening a road to make it safer or because a farmer needs larger fields so that he can use big, modern farm machines. However, hedgerows are such a valuable part of our countryside that we should replace lost hedgerows with new ones.

For your project, you should draw a plan for a new hedgerow and include the different plants to use in it. You will need to consider where you will plant your new hedgerow, and also the size and shape for it.

Tips for planning a new hedgerow:

- Native plants are nearly always better for wildlife than introduced ones.
- Plants that produce berries or nuts will help feed the wildlife.
- Plants that grow naturally in the surrounding countryside will always grow well.
- Evergreen plants are good for providing shelter in winter.
- Hawthorn is an excellent traditional hedge tree. Blackthorn, however, is not as good because it spreads too quickly.
- Once a new hedge is established, many local plants will grow in it naturally.

Share your learning with others

You can share your field trip findings, including your project and report, with others on the ENFO website. On www.enfo.ie, just click on 'ENFO Kids' and you will find the Hedgerows section under the heading 'Leafy Lovelies'. You can display your project on any page in the Hedgerow section or the School Project Upload section by clicking on the Upload button on any page and filling in the details. You will be able to upload text, photos, audio and videos, and also view those uploaded by others.

The Exploring a Hedgerow Field Guide was written by writer, broadcaster and environmentalist, Dick Warner.