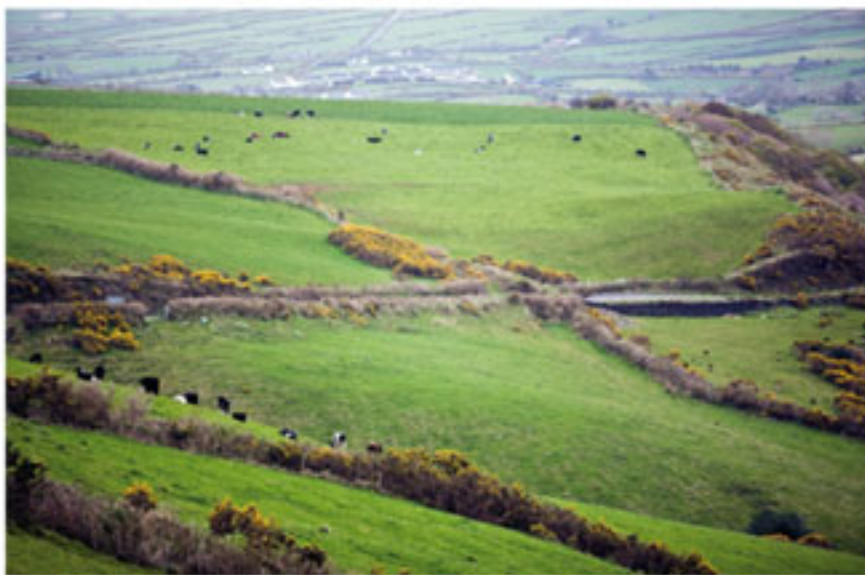




Hedges come to life in spring, when blackthorn fills the landscape with blossom, and songbirds noisily guard territory for the breeding season. Functioning as living barriers, hedgerows keep farm animals in or out of fields and shelter them from bad weather. They are the green veins of the countryside, through which a wealth of life flows.



Most of Ireland's hedges were planted in the 1800s, although some date back to medieval times. Older hedges often have very large banks and ditches, and more shrub species than later hedges. Our hedgerows vary from low windswept hedges with stone banks and willow and gorse in upland areas, to great tall hedges on good land with big earthen banks, home to as many as 15 different shrub species.

Most hedges consist of a raised earth-and-stone bank with thorny shrubs planted alongside, and a drainage ditch, home to frogs and other wildlife. Thorny shrubs such as whitethorn (also called hawthorn), blackthorn and holly are the most familiar hedgerow shrubs, while privet, hazel, spindle and guelder-rose are also found. Hedgerow trees such as ash, alder, elm, crab apple, oak, rowan and willow make the habitat more diverse. Ivy climbing up through hedges is good for roosting birds and bats, and its black berries are one of the only foods available to birds during the lean winter months.

Hedgerows occupy about 1.5 per cent of Ireland's land area, a bigger proportion than

established native woodlands. They provide important wildlife habitats akin to woodland edges. Bees, butterflies, moths, hoverflies, ladybirds and snails feed from the huge variety of plants and flowers growing along hedge banks and verges. Two thirds of Ireland's bird species nest in hedgerows and depend on them for their food, which includes flowers, fruits, seeds and invertebrates. Birds of prey such as owls, kestrels and sparrowhawks hunt along hedges, preying on small birds and mammals. Hedgerows are very important as 'ecological corridors', connecting other patches of habitat such as woodlands and wetlands, and allowing wildlife to move through the countryside.

Hedges give a wooded appearance to the deforested Irish landscape, and regulate the movement of water, reducing soil erosion and protecting waterways from pollution. They also prevent the spread of disease from farm to farm, and host spiders, ladybirds, birds and other useful predators of crop pests.

THREATS TO THE HABITAT

Hedges often need some form of management to keep them dense and stock-proof. Many more birds will nest in the protection of a thick, tall, dense hedge with plenty of growth in the lowest metre, than in a scrawny, thin hedge. Without suitable management – such as occasional side-trimming and 'hedge laying' – hedge shrubs can lose their dense lower growth. (Hedge laying is a traditional form of hedgerow management that works with nature to create a strong 'living fence' from hawthorn.)

Hedges also suffer from bad management, being cut too hard, too often, too low, or at the wrong time of year. Hedges should only be cut when they are dormant, and when birds are not nesting in them. It is illegal to cut hedges during the bird-nesting season from 1 March to 31 August, unless exempted for reasons such as road safety. Many hedges are removed

unnecessarily for land restructuring, construction and housing development. Dumping rubbish – including garden waste – can also damage hedgerow flora and fauna.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PROTECT THE HABITAT?

Familiarise yourself with the hedgerows in your community and what grows and lives in them, perhaps keeping a 'hedge diary'. Tell others about the wildlife in hedges and the importance of good management. If you see someone cutting hedgerows during the nesting season, make a note of who, when and where, and report it to the National Parks & Wildlife Service immediately (see below). Plant a new native hedge around your home or garden, plant into gaps in existing hedges, encourage good hedgerow management in your locality, and contribute to good planning by pushing for hedgerow retention as part of new developments.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- An Taisce: www.antaisce.org
- Conservation in the community: www.heritageknowhow.ie
- For results of hedgerow surveys in Laois, Offaly, Roscommon, Westmeath, Kildare, Cavan and Mayo, search the websites of these county councils (eg www.laois.ie).
- Irish Wildlife Trust: www.iwt.ie
- Hedge Laying Association of Ireland: www.hedgelaying.ie
- For contact details of your local Countryside Ranger, see the government services section of the phone directory, or visit www.npws.ie.