

## Species Rich Road Verges HAP



### Objectives

1. To conserve road verges with existing nature conservation value
2. To restore degraded, formerly flower-rich road verges and ensure their conservation
3. To create a robust network of road verges of nature conservation value throughout the National Park, by strengthening habitat links between species rich stretches
4. To promote this valuable community resource

### Introduction

Within the North York Moors National Park around 170 roadside verges of conservation importance were identified in 1985. These verges were extremely varied and include species typical of unimproved grassland, wetland, woodland and moorland. Most wildlife rich verges in the Park are found in farmland, with the best linked to other fragments of species rich habitat.

Surveys in 1999 of the verge network unfortunately showed that the conservation value of around half of the verges had sadly deteriorated. Selected surveys since then have shown a continuing pattern of decline. Following the national trend, much of this has been due to neglect. Unmanaged verges become rank with long, coarse grasses, rosebay willowherb, hogweed, cow parsley and thistle. Where neglect occurs over a number of years what were once species rich verges often begin to be replaced by scrub.

Currently 186 species rich road verges, a total of 166km, have been identified in and around the North York Moors National Park, many of which contain key species. Species rich road verges are key habitat networks and are very important links to other valuable habitats, along with the surrounding linear habitats that make up the vergescape, such as hedgerows and field margins. Management works are being undertaken to improve verges and annual monitoring is in place.

### Progress (2008-2012)

- 65km of flower-rich road verge networks were managed by contractors during 2009 in areas including Cropton, Thornton Le Dale, Wykeham, Rievaulx, Egton and Staithes.
- National Park volunteers played a huge part in road verge management; between 2008-2012 there were 152.5 volunteer days.
  - September 2009 10 volunteer days included raking-up and removing verge cuttings after the contractor cuts, yet only the best areas on the best verges were managed in this way.

- Five task days involving 44 volunteers took place on three special interest verges; one strimming and raking to enhance a verge for cowslips, with the other work being on sections of verges that had been scraped the previous year and required weeding, cutting and raking.
- Autumn 2010 volunteers carried out scrub and bracken clearance at Blackpark.
- Autumn 2011 a stretch of Hancow Road was cleared of scrub by Conservation Volunteers, as well as scrub and bramble removal at Broomhouse Lane in October.
- During 2012 Cropton Bank verge was cut and raked in October, and Himalayan Balsam pulled and removed.
- Cutting selected special interest road verge networks annually can be important for conservation purposes. This action needs to be addressed in the future to ensure as many suitable verges as possible are cut regularly and at the right time(s) of year.
- 91 salt heaps were replaced with salt bins across 12 verges from September 2008 to January 2009. By the end of 2012 a total of 177 salt bins had been placed on conservation value road verges.
- To control and restrict the spread of Himalayan balsam along road verges, management on the verge network in the Wass area was undertaken over two years.
- There was a target to extend the botanical interest of road verges by clearing / scraping stretches now supporting rank vegetation and spreading green hay from flower-rich areas onto the bare ground where appropriate;
  - Scraping of vegetation from Outgang Lane, Lockton (300m) and Overscar Lane, Thornton Dale (170m) took place in 2009
  - NP volunteers carried out work in 2010 on three verges which had previously been scraped at Overscar Lane and Outgang Lane. The scraped verge at the last site had been topped with green hay from Caulklands Quarry. The results of scraping have varied between sites and the benefits and cost of scraping are still to be fully assessed, but 45m of expansion of species rich verge was achieved
- 100 leaflets prompting a good practice approach to maintenance was sent to all Parish Councils in the North York Moors. Provision of advice to Parish Councils and the public from National Park staff is on-going.
- It was hoped that verges would be surveyed for invertebrate interest, particularly glow-worm areas, in conjunction with wider surveys, but these have not yet taken place.
- An external charity called PLACE have set up a team of 'verge volunteers' to monitor the flora on the Park's special interest verges. A monitoring form is used to collect information on verge management and key species;
  - In 2011 there were 43 monitoring days undertaken by PLACE volunteers.
  - In 2012 there were 40.5 monitoring days by PLACE volunteers.
  - During 2008-2012 160 of the 186 special road verges have been monitored at least once.
  - The management information was then used to target action on the ground.
  - During 2011/2012 PLACE volunteers undertook full surveys of many road verges across the North York Moors, with some quick surveys also completed to look for key species over a number of verges.
- The nature conservation interest and accessibility of the habitat to local communities was promoted. Appropriate management of road verges was highlighted on the LEADER website as part of the parish caretaker scheme. Although four out of the five goals were achieved, this action was not quite completed due to the differing priorities of the stakeholders involved.

## **Case Study**

### **Volunteers care for our special verges**

Over the spring and summer roadside verges are one of the most colourful, ever-changing, but sometimes overlooked habitats. Not overlooked in the North York Moors National Park, though, where volunteer involvement goes back to 1985.

Following on from a survey of all verges then by two local botanists, there are currently 186 stretches of verge in and adjacent to our National Park that have been identified as 'special' for their diversity of plants. Many of these verges are monitored each year by a team of keen volunteers who keep an eye on key species and inform us of any issues that need attention, such as spreading salt heaps, invasive plant species, untimely cutting or lack of management. We also, where possible, negotiate specific cutting regimes on special verges managed by the county council or individual parish councils.

Roadside verges are generally cut for road safety which is paramount, but it is not always necessary for them to be cut just when the flowers are in their prime. Like all species rich grasslands, some management is required to prevent the habitat becoming rank and overgrown, but the timing of the cut should try to allow most flowers to bloom and seed. Volunteers raking the cut grass off the best sections also improves them for the future.

Special road verges can also be vulnerable to salt damage. Salt heaps kill the vegetation under them and where the salt leaches out this can destroy vegetation some distance from the heap. Providing salt bins reduces salt leachate damage on verges rich in wild flowers, but where this is not possible, volunteers can dig small shallow grips at the base of heaps to direct the salty water straight onto the road. Limiting salt heaps to one side of the road and avoiding the best flowery stretches also reduces damage.

Road verges form links between many valuable habitats throughout the countryside and the better they are managed, the better these links will function to enable both familiar and less well-known plant and animal inhabitants of the National Park to survive in future.