

THE WILDLIFE OF CORNISH HEDGES



Outline: Cornish hedges are naturally very rich in species due to their construction, the shape of the land and the maritime climate. The flail type of hedge trimmer is devastatingly damaging to the biodiversity of the Cornish hedge.

Cornish hedge habitats.

The Cornish hedge provides everything necessary for the full cycle of the life it supports - earth, stone, crevices damp and dry, shelter, decaying matter and a huge variety of plant life from microscopic fungi to forest trees. According to locality these hedges provide habitats including the characteristics of flower-meadows, woodlands, scrub, field margins, heathland, wetland, rocky outcrops and sea cliffs. Their long continuous history means they are often species-linked to the original pre-farming land. Cornish hedge plants include elements of the original woodland, heathland or other habitat, while the hedge stones host a scree population of mosses and lichens. A single hedge can contain several different basic habitats, and species from those as diverse as marsh and mountain scree can flourish together. A succession of different wild-flowers grows from between the stones, and typically along the top gorse, hawthorn, blackthorn, ivy, honeysuckle and wild rose blossom in their season. (www.cornishhedges.co.uk > Cornish Hedges Library > “Check-list of Types of Cornish Hedge Flora”. Picture Gallery > Flora, Wildlife. www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk > “Nature”, “Why protect hedges?”.)

Rich diversity of species.

Cornwall's hedges add up to a wildlife area of roughly 50,000 acres, and could contain around 600 flowering species. With also the woody species, together with grasses, sedges, ferns, mosses and lichens, a mile of healthy traditionally-maintained Cornish hedge should typically contain between two and three hundred easily-visible plant species. These attract a wide variety of insects which in turn bring mammals, birds and reptiles to feed and to set up their homes in the greenery and the stony crevices. The hedge-bank combined with the bushes and trees on top caters for a much greater diversity than the ordinary hedgerow. (www.cornishhedges.co.uk > Cornish Hedges Library > “Wildlife and the Cornish Hedge”, “Cornish Hedges in Gardens”. www.cornwall.gov.uk > living > environment and waste > living environment > landscape, trees and plants > hedges > wildlife in Cornish hedges)

Maintaining the hedge wildlife.

Building, repairing and trimming the Cornish hedge so it keeps its healthy condition are skills on which the wildlife depends. These versatile and beautiful hedges need traditional construction and care so that they continue to be a haven of life. Much damage has been done to their structure and biodiversity by heavy trimming with flails, which has decimated invertebrate life, prevented wild flowers seeding and caused ivy and rough weeds to take over the hedge-bank. In many hedges over two-thirds of the species have been eliminated by the flail-mower since 1970. In some, overtaken by flail-induced rampant weeds such as winter heliotrope and Irish ivy, hardly any of the original native species are left. Trimming in late winter with a finger-bar cutter, alternate sides of the hedge in different years, best safeguards the plant and animal life. (www.cornishhedges.co.uk > Cornish Hedges Library > “Wildlife and the Cornish Hedge”, “The Life and Death of a Flaileed Cornish Hedge”, “How to Look After a Cornish Hedge”. www.cornwall.gov.uk > living > environment and waste > living environment > landscape, trees and plants > hedges > field hedge management. www.cornishhedges.co.uk > Community Cornish Hedge Project)

Further reading: www.cornishhedges.co.uk > Cornish Hedges Library > “Literature Sources”.