



# Road Verges Habitat Action Plan

## 1. Introduction

Two priority UK BAP species occur on road verges in Worcestershire: *Dianthus armeria* Deptford pink and *Arabis glabra* tower mustard. Many road verges in the county are notable because of their unimproved grassland habitat that is of local and UK BAP quality.

## 2. Current Status

### 2.1 Description of habitat

The road verge is an important wildlife habitat resource in Worcestershire. A roadside verge is defined for the purposes of this action plan as the thin ribbon of the highway that lies on either side of a road. It is confined by a boundary: usually a hedgerow, wall or fence away from the road. The boundary is not considered as part of the verge in this document. The verge may frequently incorporate a ditch, which can represent an additional valuable wildlife feature.

Road verges provide valuable wildlife corridors. Due to a lack of intensive management many verges contain an extensive range of flora and fauna. Some of Worcestershire's rarest species exist on road verges, for example the only known colony of Deptford pink in the county exists on the A449 road verge. Our knowledge of road verges is superficial and incomplete, as they have rarely been studied as a habitat.

Road verges show great variability in, for example:

- Age – some roads are from the original unplanned paths, whilst others were created as a result of the Enclosure Acts 1750. Many major road verges have arisen from modern road schemes in the last 30 years.
- Width – anything from less than 1m to more than 15m.
- Soil – top or sub soil.
- Geology – acidic, neutral or calcareous.
- Aspect and slope.
- Extent of shading by vegetation.
- Drainage – may have trench drains, stone filled drains or no drainage.
- Management – from unmanaged to regular cutting.
- Ownership – County Council or adjacent landowner.

All these factors interact to determine the flora and fauna that inhabits or uses a particular stretch of road verge. Grassy verges are of particular concern in this plan but scrub and trees can also be present. The verge may also have geological or archaeological interest.

Traditional management was generally benign to wildlife on road verges. Lengthsmen employed by the Highways Department usually hand-cut verges with a scythe or slasher and hay making or grazing on verges was common. The cost of this labour intensive work and the development of the mechanical flail in the 1960s resulted in a far less wildlife-friendly procedure of flailing by tractor or mowing. This leaves the cuttings on the verge, which enriches the soil, results in thick mulch and suppresses all but the most vigorous plants.

## 2.2 Distribution and extent

In Worcestershire the estimate for the total length of road verges is 2296 km with a total resource of approximately 695 ha.

## 2.3 Legislation

There is no legislation protecting the biodiversity value of the road verge habitat except in instances where those species present have their own legal protection. Deptford pink is protected under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

## 2.4 Summary of important sites

Road Verge Nature Reserves (RVNRs) have existed in Worcestershire for almost 30 years. Worcestershire Wildlife Consultancy undertook a review of all RVNRs in 1995. 44 sites qualified for continued inclusion according to the criteria used, with a total area of 4.4 ha and an average size of 0.1 ha.

A cluster of sites around Kidderminster that comprise one of only two meta-populations of tower mustard in the UK

## 3. Current factors affecting the habitat

The main factors leading to loss of or damage to the wildlife interest of the road verge habitat are:

- Dumping of spoil or fly-tipping.
- Temporary dumping / storage of road-building materials.
- Trenching for mains services.
- Methods used in ditching.
- Car and lorry parking.
- Vehicles including tractors impacting on the verge edge.
- Hedge cutting machinery.
- Use by travellers.
- Pollution and spillage from vehicles.
- Run off and spray containing salt.
- Herbicide application and pesticide drift.
- Over management by adjacent landowners.
- Trampling by horses.
- The spread of alien species or weeds, including *Fallopia japonica* Japanese knotweed, *Brassica napus* oil-seed rape and *Senecio jacobaea* ragwort.
- Lack of management leading to invasion by coarse grasses and scrub vegetation on grassland.
- Planting and growth of trees on grassland.
- Planting of cultivated / ornamental plant varieties.
- Reseeding with inappropriate seed mixes.
- New urban developments including road widening.
- Inappropriate cutting regimes.

## 4. Current Action

### 4.1 Local protection

Two sites that incorporate road verges have been notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest: Crophorne New Inn (0.123 ha) on the A44 and Burcott Lane Cutting (0.292 ha) at Blackwell near Bromsgrove. Both were notified for their geological interest. At several other sites, including Castlemorton Common and

the Malvern Hills SSSI, the road verge is incorporated where the designation covers land on both sides of the road.

#### **4.2 Habitat management and programmes of action**

Usually, the adjacent landowner owns the land forming the road verge. The County Council are the guardians of the public's right to use the road and are generally responsible for the maintenance of the road verge. The maintenance of the ditch is the responsibility of the landowner. Worcestershire County Council's policy for cutting road verges has safety and visibility as the primary concern. At present on rural roads there are generally two cuts a year done as late as possible after mid-April. Urban roads, which may include some villages, are cut five times a year every six weeks from mid-April. District Councils may enhance this by three or more cuts a year. All cuts are of one metre from the edge of the road, including visibility splays at junctions.

Motorways and trunk road verges are under the control of the Department for Transport. In Worcestershire this includes part of the M5 and M50 as well as the trunk roads A38, A46, A449 (due to be de-trunked) and the A456. These are cut under contract primarily with safety considerations in mind. Most are therefore cut as one metre swathes from the edge in addition to the visibility areas, usually twice a year. Some areas are never cut.

Since 1995 Worcestershire Wildlife Consultancy has been contracted by Worcestershire County Council to manage and continually review all of the Roadside Verge Nature Reserves according to management plans agreed with the County Council. The Consultancy has developed four different options for appropriate management of the RVNRs, with a fifth option of non-intervention. The addition of new sites to the RVNR programme is on an ad-hoc basis as no complete botanical survey of Worcestershire road verges has been carried out.

#### **4.3 Survey, research and monitoring**

In 1998 a botanical survey of the verges on motorways and trunk roads in the county was commissioned by the contractors for a three-year period to cover the grassland, scrub and wood edges but not any planted blocks. This will give full habitat descriptions and provide management prescriptions for implementation.

Several sites have recently been targeted by the Worcestershire Flora Project and Plantlife for rare and uncommon plants, which will be surveyed in 1998/99 for possible inclusion in the RVNR list. As well as Deptford pink and tower mustard, other threatened species of interest include *Vicia bithynica* bithynian vetch, *Campanula patula* spreading bellflower and *Isatis tinctoria* woad.

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust have produced the 'Wildlife on the Verge' information pack, which includes information on roadside verge habitats, how the public can get involved (including two specific activities for schools) and management techniques to benefit wildlife.

#### **4.4 Action for priority species**

Plantlife have secured funding from the Sita Trust for an 18-month project on tower mustard. The sites in Worcestershire where this species is found are one of only two surviving meta-populations in the UK. Only seven sites now remain in the county, all clustered around Kidderminster. The project will involve all seven

extant (surviving) sites and at least one other proposed introduction site (presently unknown). Although the sites are currently isolated from one another, conservation action will restore the meta-population through increasing the abundance of tower mustard via direct recruitment and the seed bank, increasing the availability of suitable habitat and re-introducing plants to new nearby sites.

## 5. Associated Plans

Veteran Trees, Urban, Semi-natural Grassland, Ancient/Species-rich Hedgerows.

## 6. Vision Statement

To reliably secure appropriate management of all of the county's road verges that will maximise the potential of each site to support a diverse flora and fauna.

## 7. Targets

Target Type	Target Text	Baseline value	Target Value	Target Timescale
Expansion	Increase the number of sites having a viable population of tower mustard <i>Arabis glabra</i>	7	8	2010
Achieve condition	100% of current RVNRs to be under an appropriate management regime and achieve good ecological condition	0	45	2017

## 8. Actions

Action Code	Action Category	Action Text	Location	Complete Action By	Lead Organisation	Support Organisations
WRC ROV HS 01	6.2	Undertake 'Conserving Tower Mustard' project to enhance existing known sites for the species.	Kidderminster	2010	Plantlife	WCC
WRC ROV SU 01	12.8	Carry out a tower mustard (re)introduction programme on at least one additional site.	Kidderminster	2010	Plantlife	WCC
WRC ROV HS 02	6.2	Secure and or implement appropriate management regime on all RVNRs so that all achieve and maintain good condition.	Worcestershire	2015	WWC	WCC

### References and further information

Barker, S (1995). *Review of Worcestershire's RVNR*. Worcestershire Wildlife Consultancy.

Worcestershire Wildlife Trust (1995). *Wildlife on the Verge*. Worcestershire Wildlife Trust / Bass Wildlife Action Fund