

## Hedges playing a vital role in the Cornish landscape

### Cornish Hedges

*Cornish hedges provide an important network link of habitats providing sanctuary and corridors for wildlife that might otherwise be isolated. They are also important habitats in their own right, but they are not protected, writes Laura Guy-Wilkinson, data officer for ERCCIS at the Cornwall Wildlife Trust; [www.erccis.org.uk](http://www.erccis.org.uk)*

Land has been bounded by hedges for over a thousand years and hedges are an intrinsic part of the Cornish landscape. Some hedges date to the Bronze Age when fields and commons were divided into small enclosures for livestock and they give a snapshot into the history of Cornwall.

But they are not all the same, and vary around the county depending upon climate, available materials and local farming practices. From the granite boulder walls of West Penwith to the coastal hedges lichen-dressed or carpeted by Thrift. The traditional Cornish hedges are topped with Hawthorn, while in east Cornwall the laid and coppiced Hazel hedges buzz with the sound of insects and birdsong.

Hedges are a very special part of Cornwall's landscape but unlike a hedgerow which is a row of trees and shrubs, the Cornish Hedge holds a wealth of importance in its construction and building it is still regarded a hugely valuable skill today. Built wide at the base, often with a verge or a ditch and narrow at the top and always with local materials, the Cornish hedge generally has a compacted soil middle with either stone or turf face with a grassy top that supports a shrubby hedgerow on top and often trees including oak, ash, sycamore or elm.

The way the middle earth is constructed ensures enriched soil that can provide self-sustaining nutrients for a huge range of species. The vertical hedge works in symbiosis with the damp ditch alongside the hedge, created from years of 'casting up' that fills back up the height of the hedge and recycles the wildflower seedbank.

Hedges still fulfil their original purpose of marking boundaries between landowners. They are a valuable source of sustainable timber and firewood, enclosing grazing animals and providing shelter from the Cornish weather. They also intercept heavy downpours preventing flooding and soil erosion. They capture and filter fertilisers and pollutants and host pollinators vital to food production. But hedges are important habitats in their own right supporting up to six hundred native species of plants and shrubs which in turn support a varied population of insects, mammals and birds. They link a network of habitats enabling otherwise isolated species to move freely among them. With ancient woodland habitats in decline, hedges provide sanctuary and act as wildlife corridors to areas that were once interlinked.

Hazel Dormouse [which is] a species in decline, relies on edible flowers, insects and protein-rich hazelnuts to prepare for a winter in hibernation. Hedgehogs use this web of interlinked green corridors; of woody growth, hedge bases and sides, to navigate their way around and to keep them safe from predators.

Bats also use hedges as highways to navigate around the landscape, finding their way from the roost to important foraging areas and back again. Bats prefer not to fly over

open ground, preferring to use hedges and hedgerows as shelter from the elements and from predators. The presence of veteran trees along hedges can provide roosting sites for many bat species.

Hedge-side ditches are home to a variety of wetland plants and animals, such as the damp-loving Marsh Marigold or Purple Loosestrife. Leaf-filled soggy ditches are also five-star residences for Hedgehogs and hibernating Common Toads alike.

The classic English Hedgerow is protected under UK law not only as a habitat but also for its function as a wildlife corridor. However, Cornish Hedges do not fall under this protection which means they are at risk from destruction and development. This would be a huge loss to Cornwall where traditional hedge laying is deemed a hugely valuable and irreplaceable skill.

Understanding the extent of the hedge network in Cornwall is vital to ensure their protection and sustainable management for years to come. With an estimated 30,000 miles of hedges in Cornwall creating a map of the entire network at county scale is a huge undertaking. Using advances in technology and satellite imagery, with a staff of two and twenty volunteers ERCCIS has identified hedge features across the Cornish landscape and mapped them in a project that took 20 months to complete. The map will provide a wealth of information for research, conservation and sustainable management of our wildlife and habitats. It will give us an understanding about how different species use habitats and interact with the wider landscape. We can investigate how connected and interconnected these areas are in the hope that future management plans will help protect isolated populations. The map therefore will be of great value to landowners, researchers and professionals.

Part of Cornwall Wildlife Trust, ERCCIS is the official Local Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, working to collate, manage and disseminate biological and geological information and working with local and national biological recorders and conservation organisations for the better conservation of the county. For more information or to request access to the ERCCIS Hedges Information, please contact the ERCCIS team at [erccis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:erccis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk) / 01872 302250

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The article appeared in the **Cornwall Mammal Group** Aut/Winter 2018 Newsletter

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