

Hildersham Nature Recovery Plan

Verges Survey April/May 2023

Document 3: Discussion

Table of Contents

Verges Survey: Summary.....	1
Background.....	2
“More, Bigger, Better, Joined”.....	3
Network Expansion Zone land:.....	3
Network Enhancement Zone 1 definition:.....	3
Network Enhancement Zone 2 definition:.....	3
Priority Habitat - UK BAP Priority Habitats definition:.....	4
Hildersham: Zones and Networks.....	4
Grass-cutting on verges and public spaces in Cambridgeshire.....	5
The next steps.....	6
Councillors’ Views on Biodiversity.....	7
1973:.....	7
“In fifty years, the general public will probably have to visit special areas if they want to see native wild flowers blooming.”.....	7

Verges Survey: Summary

As explained in the Verges Survey Report (referring to the [data spreadsheets](#)), it was found that the verges in the central part of the village contain many wild flora, generally flowering from the spring to the early autumn.

Importantly, amongst the insects attracted to these flora were bees, which play a vital role in propagating crops.¹ They have vanished from one in four of the places where they used to be found in the early 1980s,² a disappearance due to factors such as intensive farming, pesticides, pollution, disease, and climate change. Their depleted numbers – with the associated threat to the human population - have now resulted in particular **Governmental concern**.³

Besides these factors, a further problem faced by the creatures is loss of habitat; i.e., land with plants where they can forage,⁴ flowers and plants whose growing season generally lasts from about April to August or September.

How has loss of habitat become such a problem? And why should it affect Hildersham?

1 See [1.1, pg. 4, here](#).

2 H. Pilchard, “The Explainer: Bees,” 82-7, [BBC Science Focus](#) (July 2023): 82.

3 And see [also here](#).

4 Pilchard 2023: 87.

Background

Some two hundred and fifty years of industrialisation, combined with an increasing population (about 8 million in the late 18th century; in the early 21st century, nearer 70 million), have combined to place enormous pressure on wild plants and creatures, their interrelationships, and the networks that sustain them all within the UK. In fact, the numbers of plants, living creatures and their haunts and habitats have dwindled to the point where [an emergency has now been declared](#) nationwide.

The problem is that, unlike most human emergencies, scenes of screaming sirens and turmoil, this particular crisis has been taking place all around us over the decades, invisible, insidious, and ultimately fatal: a “silent killer.”⁵

The unheard and unseen nature of this disaster is perhaps why it is sometimes argued that, in this particular area of South Cambridgeshire at least, there is so much surrounding agricultural land and grassland that plants and animals can surely be left to carry on just as they always have, without the need for human intervention or encouragement.

But wild plants and creatures aren't carrying comfortably along. Far from it: they are instead spiralling into an ever-accelerating vortex of decline and ultimate extinction.

Since 1970, for example, almost one-third of birds – 73 million - have disappeared,⁶ Cambridgeshire being one of the areas that has witnessed some of the highest declines.⁷ This cannot be unconnected with the [two million or so acres of grassland](#) lost in the UK since 1990, 130 sq. kms. in Cambridgeshire alone;⁸ the marked decrease of semi-natural grassland (in Cambridgeshire between the 1930s and 2018 (27.3% down to 4.5%) is shown [here](#).⁹ (And visual reminders of the extent to which the landscape has changed in this area since 1960 are revealed in this 1959 video [\(Haverhill to Cambridge\)](#) and this [2020 video](#) of the same journey.)

In view of these figures, perhaps it is not so surprising that [South Cambridgeshire District Council](#) and Cambridge City Council have joined with the UK Government and other statutory bodies in declaring biodiversity emergencies.

But what could be done to combat plummeting numbers of wild plants and creatures in East Anglia, including bees, and help them recover?

5 [Cristiana Paşca-Palmer](#), Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (see [also here](#)).

6 [Source](#). (Online comment: the disappearance of bird populations affects ecosystem services and the natural food chain, and could also signal underlying environmental issues such as habitat loss, pollution, and changes in climate that can also affect human health and well-being.)

7 Source: [Professor J. Vickery](#).

8 See also [here, p. 16](#).

9 16, 17.

“More, Bigger, Better, Joined”¹⁰

The existence of this problem has not been lost on DEFRA and Natural England. Between them, they have devised a system of land classification pinpointing areas best suited to helping wild plants and creatures return to their previous numbers: Network Enhancement Zones; and Priority Habitat (see [here](#)).¹¹

Network Expansion Zone land:

... [has the] potential for expanding, linking/joining networks across the landscape ... Action in this zone to improve connections between existing habitat networks can be targeted here.¹²

... [and it] identifies potential locations to consider improving the links and joins and reduce fragmentation at a wider landscape scale ...¹³

Network Enhancement Zone 1 definition:

Land connecting existing patches of primary and associated habitats which is likely to be suitable for creation of the primary habitat. Factors affecting suitability include: proximity to primary habitat, land use (urban/rural), soil type ... Action in this zone to expand and join up existing habitat patches and improve the connections between them can be targeted here.¹⁴

Network Enhancement Zone 2 definition:

Land within close proximity to the existing habitat components that are unlikely to be suitable for habitat re-creation but where other types of habitat may be created or land management may be enhanced including delivery of suitable Green Infrastructure.

10 https://magic.defra.gov.uk/Metadata_for_magic/Habitat%20Network%20Mapping%20Guidance.pdf, Introduction; pg. 2.

11 On [Magic Maps](#), follow these links:

- Habitats and species
- Habitats
- Other
- National Habitat Network All Habitats Combined (England) (Habitat Networks (England) - Lowland Calcareous Grassland)
- Network Enhancement Zone 1, etc.
Navigate to Hildersham.

12 https://magic.defra.gov.uk/Metadata_for_magic/Habitat%20Network%20Mapping%20Guidance.pdf, Pg. 6, n. 8.

13 Ibid., Pg. 9.

14 Ibid., Pg. 6, n. 5.

Priority Habitat - UK BAP Priority Habitats definition:

... a range of semi-natural habitat types that were identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action.

... The list of Priority Habitats has been used to help draw up statutory lists of habitats of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity in [the UK].

Examples of all these landscape classifications are to be found in Hildersham.

Hildersham: Zones and Networks

In the centre of the village, the basic **Network Enhancement Zone** area occupies a margin leading from Willow Cottage parallel with the Back Road, south-eastward to the outskirts of Linton, and along to Paynes Meadow.

Network Enhancement Zone 1 covers the northern part of the village. From a point near Willow Cottage, next to the River Granta, it extends northward up to the edge of the Roman Road, and away northwestward to the GogMagog Hills.

Network Enhancement Zone 2 covers a large part of the rest of Hildersham as far as Forge Green.

Finally, in the centre of the village, an area of **Priority Habitat** extends around Willow Cottage and down to the river. Over the other side of the High Street, it continues alongside the river and up to the Abington footpath bridge; and north-eastward from the Back Road up towards Balsham.

Joining up these zones with other relevant habitats in the manner indicated obviously requires the long-term collaboration of all interested parties: government agencies, conservation organizations, landowners, farmers and the local community.

The HNRP hopes to investigate further steps that could be taken to implement these objectives, including areas out along the allotments and eastward towards Linton, not forgetting the southern half of the village and other areas to the south of the A1307.

But the immediate question is: could the plant-life on the Hildersham verges¹⁵ be managed in line with the objectives of the various Network Enhancement Zones? Could the verges be looked after in such a way as to realise their full potential - albeit on a very small scale - in the long-term struggle against the decline of wild species? And could more be done to enable the verges to link up with other designated zones, and so contribute to the concept of *More, Bigger, Better, Joined?*

15 [Road verge extent and habitat composition across Great Britain](#) goes into more detail on the examination and classification of verges.

Grass-cutting on verges and public spaces in Cambridgeshire

Some householders in Hildersham and elsewhere, perhaps unaware that “Wildlife loves what [many people see as ‘mess’](#),” find the appearance of untrimmed verges troubling. Others are concerned about the opinions of neighbours if they leave the verges outside their properties uncut.

But, as explained by Cambridge City Council:

[Frequently cutting grass very short](#) might look tidy but this has minimal benefits for wildlife. Allowing grasses to grow and be more meadow-like helps wildlife.

Animals and plants benefit from areas of meadow-like grassland. More wildflowers will grow, produce seeds and increase year-on-year. Wildflowers and grasses provide food for insects including bumblebees, hoverflies, beetles, butterflies, moths and grasshoppers.

About fifteen miles to the north of Cambridge, between Ely and Chatteris, lies the village of Mepal, where a survey of flora was carried out on a verge bordering a local road known as Brick Lane:

At 1st glance with prebiodiversity-crisis glasses on, the verge bordering the field on Brick Lane could be seen as ‘untidy’. But delve deeper and it’s actually a revelation. Hosting an amazing number of plant species, which will only improve over the coming years with the right management, an initial survey kindly undertaken by a knowledgeable Mepal resident, identified 32 different plant species including 7 of the top 12 important pollinators species in this [most unpromising scrap of land ...](#)

Here in Hildersham, eight miles south-east of Cambridge, the churchyard is now being managed with a view to providing habitats for plants and creatures, and efforts are being made to allay concerns about its appearance:

As we journey through the seasons, we are hoping to allow areas of the churchyard to become a haven for all manner of wildlife ...

So, if you are passing in midsummer and the grass looks long and overgrown, it is actually the beginnings of our summer meadow that will hopefully bring birds, flowers, butterflies and bees to glorify what is already a beautiful space.¹⁶

Mepal PC explain [the reasoning behind](#) their verge management programme, with particular reference to the concept of wildlife corridors:

According to Plantlife there are over 313,000 miles of rural road verge in the UK. This is equal to half of our remaining flower-rich grasslands and meadows. If their

16 [May 2021](#).

management guidelines were followed on all UK verges, we could enjoy an estimated 400 billion more wild flowers, plus all the associated life these flowers support. One mile of flower-rich verge can produce 20kg of nectar sugar per year, enough to feed millions of pollinators’.

The verge cutting by the Parish Council in Mepal took place in late March/early April, when the weather allowed for this, and the next scheduled cut for the verges will be in September/ October. Changes to how roadside verges are maintained was implemented to help boost wildlife habitats and plant species across Mepal/ Cambridgeshire to protect wildflowers and improve wildlife corridors ...

These wildlife corridors, which are areas of land that connect species with habitats, will provide living spaces for many species, with a particular focus on pollinators such as bees.

The reference to “areas of land ... connect[ing] species with habitats” ties in with the thinking behind the concept of Network Enhancement Zones, and the encouragement to join them up.

The verges extending from one end of Hildersham to the other measure about two-thirds of a mile, which, doubled, represents something over a mile. Not all of the flora on these verges could be left uncut: some would still need to be removed for reasons of highway safety and general management.

In the great scheme of things, something over a mile of flowering verge, even if the cutting regime were altered to produce 20kg – 44 lbs. - of nectar sugar per year, is nothing.

In the great scheme of things, something over a mile of flowering verge is everything: if what it represents is a first small step in the much larger-scale vision, the “creation of primary habitat” (or as near to it as possible), in the northern part of the village.

The next steps

Recent comments from Hildersham residents have expressed great concern at the removal of wild flowers which, although common, are nevertheless perceived as attractive in their own right - e.g., the ox-eye daisies on Forge Green (now with their own place in the village heart), and the cow parsley in Blench Lane.

Moreover, it clearly makes little sense to remove potential food sources from endangered species such as bees during a critical time (say, between early spring and the end of the summer) when they are actively foraging for nectar and pollen).

Clearly, it is essential, as hammered home by DEFRA and South Cambridgeshire District Council amongst others, that land under public control should be managed with a view to maximising its

potential to regenerate all wild plants, creatures and insects, including bees. And Hildersham, like all Councils, is obliged to have regard to these considerations.

In the final section of this report, therefore, we shall describe our proposals for a revised verge management programme. (See Document 4).

Councillors' Views on Biodiversity

The following are views that emerged forty-two years apart from two local Parish Councillors working on the Linton and Hildersham Neighbourhood Plan, and concerned about the problems facing the survival of wild creatures and plants:

11 5 2015:

1973:

Biodiversity: Protect and enhance biodiversity

- Protect designated areas (green spaces, gardens), protected species, hedgerows and woodlands rich in animal life.
- Protecting ancient trees
- Promoting preservation, restoration and re-creation of wildlife habitats (flora and fauna)
- Assessment of potential threats to biodiversity
- Seeking opportunities to enhance biodiversity

“In fifty years, the general public will probably have to visit special areas if they want to see native wild flowers blooming.”

Draft objectives for the Linton & Hildersham Neighbourhood Plan

[An analytical study of the public use of private land for outdoor recreation in England, 1949-1968](#), University of Cambridge. Department of Land Economy. 1973.

Cllr. Darren J. Long, Hildersham Parish Council

Judith Penelope Rossiter (Linton)