

Road Verges of Ecological Importance (RVEI) in Hampshire

Introduction

The objective of the Road Verges of Ecological Importance (RVEI) project is to identify the location and management requirements of wildlife rich road verges in Hampshire, and for HCC Highways and their contractors to implement the correct management regime.

Road verges are often the only remaining semi-natural habitat in a farmed or urban landscape. This means they have had no artificial inputs of pesticides or fertilisers and have not been ploughed or re-seeded.

As a result, they can support a rich and varied range of plants, many of which have vanished elsewhere in the countryside. This botanical diversity in turn provides a haven for pollinating insects, butterflies and small mammals and a feeding ground for birds. Road Verges also provide important corridors for wildlife, linking areas of grassland with other valuable wildlife habitats such as hedgerows and woodland. This helps plants and animals to move as they need, to cope with disturbance and adapt to climate change. There are 208 ecologically important verges within Hampshire currently designated as RVEIs.



Roundabout near Alresford showing Clustered Bellflower

Identifying RVEI sites

A wide range of data has been used to identify RVEIs since the 1980's. This has included data from the habitat survey programme co-ordinated by the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC), and from species records sent in by conservation organisations, individual botanists, members of the public etc. Evaluation and selection of RVEI sites is undertaken by the HBIC. To qualify as an RVEI, the road verge must be recognised as supporting good quality unimproved or semi natural habitat (grassland/ woodland/ heathland/fen etc.) or supporting one or more notable species¹. Also, where there is considerable local public interest in a road verge supporting an attractive flowering vegetation community or a declining species such as the glow worm.

¹**Notable species** include species protected under European legislation and the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended); species listed under S41 of the Natural & Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species; and listed as being nationally, county, or vice-county rare/scarce.

An example of several RVEIs in the area south of Basingstoke are ones that support the Striped Lychnis moth. The Striped Lychnis moth is nationally rare and restricted to the southern counties of England. In Hampshire, the caterpillars have been found almost exclusively on the tall yellow flower spikes of the Dark mullein plant (*Verbascum nigrum*) which are present on these verges. Eggs are laid in June and July on the underside of leaves, and the caterpillars hatch in August. These verges should not be disturbed between May and September when the food plant is in flower, so they only have one full width cut in April. This helps reduce the vigour of the vegetation that has grown up over the winter and is still early enough not to damage any emerging Dark mullein flower heads.

The standard routine management of road verges

Hampshire Highways is responsible for the management of all road verges in the county, except motorways and major trunk roads which are the responsibility of Highways England. In built-up areas in towns and villages (usually defined as areas within the 30mph or 40mph speed limits) the district councils maintain the road verges on behalf of the County Council. In most cases they do so at a higher cutting frequency to match the civic amenity standards that are set for public open spaces to enable ease of access.

Due to growing concerns over the protection of wildflowers and pollinator species, Hampshire County Council are working with PlantLife and their new management guidelines for the rural road verges. As a result, from 2020, the cutting season has been adjusted to keep the summer months of July and August clear of cutting except for junctions and bends where forward visibility will continue to be maintained. Some 3,700 km of grass verge are now cut between April to June by HCC's appointed contractor. This is to maintain visibility at bends, junctions and to traffic signs and, in rural locations where there is no pavement, to allow pedestrians to step off the road to allow vehicles to pass by safely.

As the rural cutting programme takes three months to complete it will result in some areas being cut earlier than they ideally need to be and others later, especially with the annual seasonal variations that are being experienced. However, this cut is predominantly just the first 1-2 metres adjacent to the carriageway which will leave the remaining areas free from cutting. During the summer months, the primary aim switches to cutting for safety purposes only to maintain visibility at junctions and bends. From mid-September onwards, the aim changes again with cutting back the full width of the verge every two years to inhibit the growth of trees, brambles and gorse etc, which can otherwise quickly create an overhead canopy stealing light from plants below and reducing biodiversity.

See also: <https://www.hants.gov.uk/transport/roadmaintenance/grasscutting>

Road verges of ecological importance (RVEIs) are covered by a separate cutting programme (see below) to maintain biodiversity regardless of whether they are urban or rural site, although again they are subject to visibility cuts at junctions and bends.

Management of RVEI sites

Plants need to remain uncut throughout their flowering and seeding period if they are to survive and reproduce. Routine cutting that takes place during May/June can be damaging and when carried out repeatedly in consecutive years can result in plant extinction. This means that most RVEI verges will

only be cut in April and/or September thus allowing the plants time to flower and set seed. Cuttings are left in situ and this can cause a mulching effect which needs to be monitored as this can also be deleterious to the survival of the plant community. For some verges, particularly chalk grassland, more frequent cutting can help reduce the mulching effect and mimic the effects of grazing.

Each RVEI site is allocated to one of four cutting regimes:

- **April cut:** for verges with species, which would still be in flower in September.
- **Late September cut:** for verges with species, which would be in flower during the April cutting period e.g. cowslips and ancient woodland flora
- **April and late September cuts:** for verges with species flowering and setting seed between May and mid September
- **Routine cut:** the standard routine cutting regime outlined earlier where it is the most appropriate for maintaining their ecological interest.

The RVEI cut is normally for the full width of the verge. RVEI sites WILL NOT be subject to the routine 1-2m rural swathe cuts carried out in spring/early summer unless required for visibility reasons where the safety of road users takes priority over the RVEI cutting regime.

Each RVEI site will have several marker posts installed on the verge to alert contractors to check the management code and to raise awareness of the project. The marker post locations will be checked each time a new survey is carried out.

Monitoring of RVEI sites

HBIC undertake a re-survey of all RVEI sites over a rolling ten-year cycle to ensure the management regime that is being applied is effective in maintaining their interest. Data/observations from the public and local naturalists for particular RVEIs or potential RVEIs are welcomed.

Contact Details

For reporting issues on verge cutting please go to:

<https://www.hants.gov.uk/transport/roadmaintenance/roadproblems/treehedge>

For further information on the RVEI project or to report important sightings on road verges please contact:

Nicky Court, Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC)

On 0370 779 2721 or enquiries.hbic@hants.gov.uk

Web: <https://www.hants.gov.uk/hbic>