

## Become a Cut Above the Rest

Autumn is a critical season for wildlife. Birds, small mammals and amphibians rely on the rural larder of fruits, nuts and insects to increase their body fat prior to the ensuing cold hunger gap.

It is widely known that the State of Nature in the UK is poor, with the UK being rated globally as being in the bottom 10% of nature depleted countries.

As a rural parish it is important that we all make every effort to stop the local decline of wildlife. Hedgerow cutting in autumn removes an entire food supply, extending the hunger gap from October through until March. Bare hedgerows eliminate small insects, spiders and larva, with additional removal of autumn foliage that offers protection and shelter through early winter. This management technique is a direct cause of bird decline in the countryside.

The alternative is hedge cutting from December to February. Hedges cut during this time retain protection, shelter and an essential food supply deep into the winter season.

Without putting obstacles in the way of management, land managers, farmers, gardeners and Parish Councillors need to identify opportunities. Some fields are not accessible through the heavy wet clay conditions of winter, some roadside corners may require trimming for road safety. But, this leaves many miles of hedgerows around fields and gardens that are cut bare through the autumn without any justification and a subsequent brutal impact on our wildlife.

Wildlife needs habitat to be enriched and restored before the loss of species tips beyond recoverable populations. The tree sparrow is now locally extinct due to habitat loss.

We can identify opportunities in our own gardens and farms to allow hedgerows to grow. Many species such as hawthorn do not fruit until their second year of growth. Endangered species such as Turtle Dove, has suffered a 93% decline since the 1970's. This beautiful summer visitor relies on mature hedgerows with a species rich grassland close by to provide insects for their chicks. Just one Turtle Dove was recorded in Monks Horton in 2020.

A hedge with benefits: Hedgerows provide shelter for livestock, break up the ferocity of wind across crops and aid in the reduction of flooding and soil run-off through soil stabilisation and deep rooting. Autumn foliage and fruiting also delivers a vivid palette in the garden and field boundary. There is not much not to like about a healthy, well connected, full hedge.

Winter is a time for planting too. We can look for opportunities to fill in hedgerow gaps to extend hunting strips for bats. Correct species selection is imperative. Native hedgerows bursting with thorn, hazel, dogwood and field maple provide a glut of food and shelter whilst the popular laurel bares no positive attributes other than shelter for mice from a scouring kestrel. This species even alters soil microbiology and inhibits all other plant growth. Certainly, one to steer away from.

With a topographic landscape of rolling hills, copses, farmland and pretty houses it is time to look more closely at how to connect this landscape, attribute management to improve the environment and restore wildlife before it is too late.

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