

The Environmental Benefits of Wildlife Hedgelaying

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The traditional country skill of hedgelaying has seen a resurgence in recent years due in part to the success of the countryside stewardship scheme. This method of hedgerow management has been practiced for centuries as a method of containing stock within a field using a living barrier of interwoven hedge plants. Rotational laying creates a dense tight hedge which has incidental benefits for nesting birds in particular and from a wildlife perspective is greatly preferable to annual flailing. However it is also very expensive and time consuming and for several years after laying it provides comparatively fewer resources for wildlife than a large overgrown hedge e.g. flowers, fruit, invertebrate habitat and nesting habitat. When practiced alongside roads (as is often the case because of the advertising opportunities for contractors and for aesthetic appeal) it can even be a danger to wildlife. Tall hedges encourage Barn Owls and Kestrels to fly up and over roads out of the impact zone of road traffic, short traditionally laid hedges do not and result in numerous avoidable deaths.

Hedgerows are possibly the single most important resource for wildlife in the wider countryside. They provide food, shelter, nesting habitat and perform the vital function of wildlife corridors linking habitats together and preventing isolation of populations. The best hedgerows for wildlife are species rich, tall, yet broad and dense at the base mimicking the woodland edge environment to which much of our native wildlife has evolved to exploit. Hedges of this nature provide nesting opportunities for declining ground nesting birds such as Grey Partridge and for birds that require a higher nest site such as Bullfinch. Broad dense hedges also protect song bird nestlings from predators such as Magpie which find it much easier to rob nests made in neat annually flailed hedges particularly if the bases have been grazed out.

These initial deleterious effects and the time and expense of the operation had bothered my colleagues and I at Aylesbury Vale Countryside Service for several years and we wondered if there was any alternative which could overcome these problems. The answer came from a local farmer, John Morris of Long Crendon in Oxfordshire. John and his son George had pioneered a form of mechanised hedgelaying which perfectly addressed our concerns.

Some years ago John had a hedge layed traditionally and was also disappointed with the results. The vast bulk of the hedge had been cut out adding time to the job for disposal (burning in the field often results in local nutrient enrichment and a subsequent growth of nettles), the resulting hedge was very thin and sparse and it had lost all the fruit which provided food for the birds in winter. The time and costs involved also seemed to him to be restrictive if he was going to lay all the hedges on his farm. He was also concerned about the lack of shelter that the newly layed hedge provided for his stock. So he decided to see if there was any way he could improve the method. What he came up with was Wildlife Hedgelaying.

The process involves cutting each stem as you would do for traditional hedgelaying but only from 1/2 to 2/3 of the way through to avoid snapping of the trunk and as low to the ground as possible. This is done with a petrol driven pruning saw which enables

access to the base of the hedge without the need to cut away material from the sides of the hedge. It is important not to cut too much from the side of the hedge to retain as much volume as possible.



Pruning saw



Typical laying cuts

After this is completed a Telescopic Handler with a special attachment made on the farm is used to gently push over the hedge in sections of a couple of meters at a time. After the hedge is down it is gently compressed with the Telescopic which helps to lock the hedge together and ensure its stability in the wind. There is no need for stakes and binders. The hedge is then fenced each side at least 1m from the base of the hedge.



Using the Telescopic Handler

Fence at least 1m metre from hedge

In this way John and George are able to lay over 200m of hedge in a day which dramatically saves them time and money. Compare this to the 20m per day at approximately £7 per meter that even an experienced hedgelayer would be pleased to accomplish. They are left with an instantly broad, thick (particularly at the base), tall hedge which has noticeably improved the survival rate of his livestock.



The berry crop is also retained and the hedge still flowers in the following year.

One mornings work



The following year's growth is vigorous and the hedge regenerates much quicker than a traditionally layed hedge. This is probably due to the reduction in stress to the tree because of how little is removed, and to the lack of impact of competing growth from species such as cleavers and nettles, which can swamp a traditionally layed hedge in the first few years after laying, because of the shading effect of the retained volume of the hedge.

Hedge 1 year after laying

John and George's hedgerows are now a pleasure to visit from an ecological point of view. In comparison to traditionally layed hedges they are much broader at the base, thicker, taller, have more deadwood for invertebrates and flower and fruit every year even after laying. Placing the fencing 1 metre from the base of the hedge allows a tussocky grassland strip to develop which also benefits nesting birds and invertebrates. Even the natural loose 'A' shape of the hedge after laying is prolonged by the grazing action of the cattle leaning over the fence, increasing the length of time that a dense base is retained for the benefit of wildlife.



Hedge 4 years after laying

This technique seems to be a perfect marriage of practical farming benefit and environmental gain and has been accepted by local Countryside Stewardship advisors. The staff at Aylesbury Vale Countryside Service are so impressed with the technique that we now only give grants for Wildlife Hedgelaying and actively promote it. We are very grateful to John and George for demonstrating it to us and hope that more farmers adopt this practice.

If you would like more details about Wildlife Hedgelaying please contact:

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