

Grass Verge Management

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Background

Nearly all the greenways on the National Cycle Network have grass verges alongside the path. Typically, the edges of the path are mown to prevent the vegetation encroaching and making the path unusable. The remainder of the verge is left unmanaged and, over time develops into nettles and brambles.



The mown edges of the Greenways remain as grass as the unmanaged sections develop into nettles and brambles

Nettles and brambles do have value for wildlife but value of the verges to wildlife can be significantly increased by implementing the following mowing regime. This will increase the number and variety of flower species on the route and so make the routes more interesting and regionally distinctive.

Path Edge Management

Preventing vegetation encroaching the path is as important as maintaining the path itself. The 1 m of vegetation along the path edge must therefore be cut at least twice each year. Where the vegetation is sparse fewer cuts may be required, but conversely, some paths may require more frequent cuts. On routes managed by Sustrans this should be judged on a site by site basis by the Area Manager or Maintenance Team.

The grass is to be cut to a length of approximately 10-15 cm. This is to keep the vegetation off the path without risking killing and injuring wildlife living in it, such as amphibians or small mammals.

Some notable or rare species, such as orchids, will grow in this short mown section and if possible should be allowed to set seed before being mown. If you are aware of any such species and can leave those flower uncut, do. If in doubt, on routes managed by Sustrans leave the flower uncut and send photographs or description to the Sustrans Ecologist for identification and advice.



Remainder of Verge

Left unmanaged, the vegetation beyond the regularly mown verge will usually develop into swathes of tall rank vegetation and then into dense continuous scrub.

Nettles and bramble provide shelter and food for wildlife but small patches of these are most valuable because they produce more flowers on the habitat edge and therefore more nectar and fruit. Opening up these swathes of continuous vegetation will also allow a greater variety of plants to grow and provide a wider range of food for wildlife throughout the year. The best habitat for wildlife would be a mosaic of scrub, tall rank vegetation and patches of longer and shorter grass.



Mosaics of scrub, tall rank vegetation and grassland

Management to open up these banks of nettles and scrub to other plant species will therefore increase the variety of flowers and animals seen along traffic free routes and make them more attractive and regionally distinctive.

Scrub;

- Retain small patches of bramble scrub along the route. A rule of thumb might be to maintain bramble along 10% - 20% of the route in patches no larger than 5 m.
- Large areas of dense continuous scrub can be cut back by hand or using a brushcutter. To reduce the labour involved in keeping the scrub back, herbicide could be used on the bramble when it is first cut back to minimise regrowth. This may initially leave an area of bare ground – don't worry – this is a valuable habitat for wildlife too!

Tall rank vegetation (nettles, thistles and willowherb);

- Retain small patches of tall vegetation along the route. A rule of thumb might be to maintain bramble along 20 – 25% of the route in patches no larger than 10 m.
- Large areas of tall vegetation should be strimmed and the arisings removed from the area (the rotting of cut vegetation puts nutrients into the soil and encourages nettle re-growth). Initially, regular mowing or herbicide can be used to reduce the to minimise nettle and thistle regrowth. Again this might leave patches of bare soil, but that is good for wildlife, especially insects.

Grassland;

- The vegetation beyond the 1m verged (discussed in previous section) should be mown once a year in September or early October. At this time of year flowers will have finished flowering and set seed for the following year.
- Grassland management is time consuming but it is good to leave sections of the grassland uncut to leave denser vegetation and seeds for food and shelter over winter. The sections left unmown can change year to year if you have limited time and resources, just cut occasional wider bays into the verge.
- On the mown sections of grassland, rake up the arisings and pile them in shady locations off the grassland. This is because as vegetation cuttings rot down nutrients are released into the soil which promote the growth of nettles and thistles which outcompete wildflowers. The piles of cuttings will also provide a good habitat for reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.

Ideally, cuttings from flower rich grassland should be left to dry out in situ before the arisings are raked up and removed to let the plant seeds drop out, but with limited manpower and resources this may not always be possible.

NB: Grass cutting should be undertaken on a warm, sunny, day so that reptiles are active and can escape.

Certain types of grassland do need different management regimes. This is a basic guide to grassland management that can be applied to our verges wherever a special management plan has not been created.