

Bedfordshire Road Verge Nature Reserves

October 2002

This list was originally created in 1998. It has been amended in 2000 and again in 2002 as surveys have revealed more information about sites or other circumstances have changed. In 2002 the list was expanded to include reserves on trunk roads though it is recognised that the management of such roads remains with the Highways Agency. It is expected that new sections of trunk roads such the Bedford Southern bypass will have stretches which will be being treated as verge reserves but details are as yet unknown. Two new verge reserves have been identified in the area north of Shefford on roads which are the responsibility of the County Council.

Selection of verge reserves

Road verge nature reserves are selected at sites where it is desirable and possible to protect and manage important wildlife interest. Sites where road safety would be prejudiced by nature conservation management would not normally be selected. Wildlife interest would normally be expected to meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Within or adjacent to a nationally important wildlife site (SSSI)
- All or part of a County Wildlife Site or meeting the criteria for CWS status.
- Supporting species that are rare or protected

Types of verge reserve

16 Verge reserves known to be of high ecological value and selected after consultation with the Wildlife Trust and Bedfordshire Wildlife Working Group. These are the traditional road verge reserves, many of which have been known for at least 30 years. The County Council Ecologist should be consulted before any work is carried out.

12 Verge reserves which are part of larger Sites of Special Scientific Interest or are immediately adjacent to SSSI with a statutory requirement to consult English Nature before any work is carried out.

5 Verge reserves which have been seeded with wildflowers since 1985 during road construction and which require a special management regime to prosper. The County Council Ecologist should be consulted before any work is carried out.

Traditional verge nature reserves

There have been road verge nature reserves in Bedfordshire for at least thirty years. Initially the local Natural History Society and Wildlife Trust negotiated with the County Council improved management of a suite of sites of high wildlife value. The object was to put in place a particularly sensitive management regime at these key sites. It has always been recognised that there are many other verges of high wildlife value either for general habitat reasons or because they support rare or protected species and the County Council is encouraged to adopt generally wildlife friendly management on all verges.

From time to time the suite of verge reserves has been reviewed and updated. Management practices have been refined and consultation procedures improved. In 1993/94 a review of verge reserves resulted in three sites being removed from the list as they no longer held wildlife judged to be of sufficient interest. Three newly recognised high quality verges were

added to the list. Subsequently further survey and the development of biodiversity action plans has added two further sites to the list.

These verge reserves cover a variety of habitats. A number may be regarded as some of the last remaining remnants of species rich neutral grassland. The verge at Dungee contains a wood edge flora and at sites in the south of the county a rich chalk flora has developed on cuttings through the chalk hills. Some nationally scarce plants such as sulphur clover, bath asparagus and crested cow-wheat are found almost exclusively on verges in the north. The fauna of these sites has been less well studied but recent work has shown that hedge, ditch and verge systems can be very rich in invertebrates including national rarities. The reserve at Potton contains the strongest British population of a very rare snail.

All these verges are of County Wildlife Site quality (the tier of wildlife value below SSSI) and are therefore protected by policies in Local Development Plans, the County Nature Conservation Strategy and the County Structure Plan.

Newly created verge reserves

Since 1985 the County Council and the Department of Transport (more recently the Highways Agency) have made attempts to sow wildflowers on some newly created road verges. Wildflower sowing on the Bromham bypass was used by the Department of Transport to help develop habitat creation procedures now used nationally. The subsequent management of these sites is necessarily very similar to that of the traditional verge reserves. A number of these verges are now regarded as of equivalent ecological value to the traditionally known sites.

Verges within, or adjacent to, Sites of Special Scientific Interest

The Wildlife and Countryside act 1981 (as amended) resulted in the review and renotification of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This work was undertaken by English Nature, the Governments advisors on nature conservation in England. SSSI's are part of a national series of sites representing the best examples of the biological and geological features in Britain.

Notification as an SSSI gives legal protection to the best sites for Wildlife and geology in England. English Nature has the responsibility for identifying and protecting SSSI's in England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981(as amended). The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 was recently amended by the Countryside Right of Way Act 2000. The new provisions of this act significantly strengthened the protection afforded to SSSI's and place certain responsibilities on owners and occupiers of SSSI's as well as on public bodies.

Public bodies under section 28G of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) include:

- Any statutory undertaker (as defined in section 262(1), (3) and (6) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990);
- A person holding office under the Crown (including government departments and agencies);
- Organisations created under a public general Act of Parliament; and
- Any other public body of any description. The definition includes privatised utilities and statutory undertakers.

English Nature would therefore class Bedfordshire County Council as a public body for the purposes of the Act and are therefore subject to the requirements of Section 28G of the Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000.

Duties of Public Bodies

As a public body Bedfordshire County Council therefore has a duty under the provisions of the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000) to "take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, to further the conservation and enhancement SSSI's". Public Bodies are required to consult English Nature if they wish to undertake any work which may damage an SSSI, or if they are considering authorising other people to carry out operations which may do so.

Work Undertaken By Bedfordshire County Council Which May Damage SSSI's.

This guidance applies when Bedfordshire County Council themselves (or contractors acting on their behalf) are undertaking an operation which is a statutory function. In this instance Bedfordshire County Council are required to inform English Nature prior to undertaking any operations that are likely to damage any of the features of interest of any SSSI. This applies to operations within an SSSI, and to operations outside the SSSI which may affect the features of interest.

English Nature has 28 days to respond to the proposals outlined in the consultation. English Nature may respond by either:

- Giving assent without conditions or,
- Giving assent with conditions, or
- Refusing assent

If English Nature agrees with the proposals, assent will be given and the work can be undertaken without waiting 28 days.

If a public body (Bedfordshire County Council in this instance) decides to undertake the operations in a manner which is contrary to English Nature's conditions (provided in the assent) or to go ahead with the operations where English Nature has refused assent then the public body must give English Nature 28 days notice that it plans to carry out the operations. This further notice must include the proposed start date and must explain how English Nature's advice has been taken into account. During this further 28 day period, English Nature may refer the case to the Secretary of State to consider.

It should be noted that breaking these requirements is a criminal offence which may carry a fine of up to £20,000 (unlimited in the Crown Court) and a restoration order.

Management of important verges.

SSSI verges should be managed to individual prescriptions agreed in advance with English Nature.

Most verges are historically a managed habitat and it is this that has given rise to their wildlife value. To stop grass cutting would allow bushes and trees to invade and shade out rare grassland species. This may also create a road safety problem.

It is important to create a range of different habitats across the width of the verge. This can be achieved by cutting only those areas essential to road safety during the summer, creating a short sward. This safety cut would normally not exceed one metre in width except where vegetation may obscure visibility at junctions or on particularly tight bends. The full width of grassland road verge reserves should be cut every autumn, within the period mid August to late September. If there are areas which cannot be reached by flail, scrub should be cut on a rotation tailored to the needs of the individual verge. From time to time it may improve long term management if stumps of cut scrub are poisoned with chemicals to prevent regrowth. Roadside hedges can spread laterally to smother important wildflowers and may need to be occasionally cut back. Where ever possible cut material, both grass and bushes, must be removed from the site to avoid the smothering of important species. Cut material must never be burnt on a verge nature reserve.

Verge reserves must never be used even temporarily for the storage of soils or other materials. Soil excavated from adjacent ditches can also cause severe damage if spread in the wrong places and where ever possible this too should be removed.

Excavation to install or repair services, kerbs etc should be avoided where ever possible but if unavoidable should be contrived to minimise damage and be agreed in advance with English Nature or the County Ecologist. Restored ground must not be sown with grass seed but should be allowed to regenerate naturally.

Herbicides and fertilisers should never be applied to verge reserves as both could lead to very rapid loss of important species. The two exceptions to this are scrub management described above and the potential spot treatment of notifiable weeds if agreed in advance with English Nature or the County Ecologist.

Most verge reserves would be damaged in the long term by the planting of trees.

Consultation

Before any work is carried out on an SSSI verge contact:

The Conservation Officer (Sarah Hamley),
English Nature, Ham Lane House, Ham Lane, Nene Park, Orton Waterville, Peterborough
PE2 5UR

Tel: 01733 405850 Fax: 01733 394093

For all other verge reserves contact:

County Ecologist (John Comont)
Culture and Environment Group, Bedfordshire County Council, County Hall, Cauldwell St
Bedford MK42 9AP

Tel: 01234 228066 Fax: 01234228232

The remainder of this document consists of a list of all road verge nature reserves with notes of their special features and management considerations.

District **Bedford Borough**

- Site:** **Bletsoe - Thurleigh** **Grid Reference:** TL 030569 - 030591
- Site Reference** **NR/C26/A/1-4**
NR/C32/A/1
- Location:** Minor roads and cutting near RAE, Bedford
- Special interest** An extensive area of very species rich grassland with an associated rich invertebrate fauna which has developed on the verges of a road system created during world war two. A national priority moth species has recently been noted breeding on scrub within the site. County Wildlife Site.
- Management** All flat areas require a full width cut in late August or early September each year with cut material removed. Earlier mowing for road safety reasons should be kept to the minimum needed. Cutting slopes require removal of a proportion of scrub each year to preserve a scrub/grass mosaic with grassland as the dominant component whilst preserving both young and mature scrub. Scrub regrowth is now very strong on the south facing cutting slope and will require immediate and regular intervention to prevent loss of species rich grassland. A scrub removal regime started again during 2001/02 after a lapse of several years and must be maintained annually
Care is needed not to damage anthills on the cutting slopes. The hedges around the site may need occasional trimming.
- Other considerations** The site is well known in wildlife circles and is studied by naturalists specialising in a wide variety of disciplines. We tend not to know who is visiting the site until something goes wrong! The farmer of land to the northwest of the cutting is gradually encroaching on a very rich part of the verge despite attempts to explain the significance of the site. Cultivations are spreading onto the verge and machinery has been stored on the verge for months at a time. A physical barrier may be needed to stop further encroachment. The farmer to the northeast of the cutting occasionally flails scrub. Gypsies occasionally camp on the widest part of the verge for short periods but this does not appear to cause permanent damage.
- Site:** **Bromham Bypass** **Grid Reference** SP993513 – T1005503
- Site Reference** **NR/A428/A/1-2**
NR/A428/B/1
NR/A428/C/1-2
- Special interest** Five substantial blocks of cutting slopes sown with various wildflower mixtures in 1987 and subsequently managed annually to realise their wildlife potential.
- Management** Four of the blocks are open grassland which require mowing with all cut material removed from site in autumn. The fifth block is a grassland scrub mosaic which will require occasional scrub coppice or scrub removal.

Other considerations The site was one of the first wildflower sowing of the Department of Transport. It's development has been studied by a variety of ecologists most recently by students from De Montfort University during 2002.

Site: Dungee Wood Grid Reference: SP 935593

Site Reference **NR/C15/A/1**

Location: Western side of the minor road from Harrold to Hinwick

Special interest A species rich wood edge habitat with an abundance of common spotted orchids. Part of the verge is within the Dungee wood County Wildlife Site

Management This is a narrow verge so early cutting for safety reasons needs to be minimised. A full width cut in late August or early September with cuttings removed.

Other considerations The adjacent hedge at the southern end of the site is cut annually by the farmer. The verge might benefit from coppicing of a strip of the adjacent Dungee wood to improve light levels. The current manager of Dungee wood is known to be sympathetic to wildlife conservation

Site: Felmersham Gravel Pits - SSSI Grid Reference: SP 987582

Site Reference **SSSI/UC29/A/1-2**

Location: The verge both sides of causeway road north of Felmersham

Special interest The verges are included within the SSSI

Management No special management requirements

Other considerations Consult English Nature if planning any action which may impact on the adjacent SSSI areas

Site: Honeydon Grid Reference: TL 128582 - 129588

Site Reference **NR/UC35/A/1-2**

Location: Both sides of unclassified road south-west of Honeydon

Special interest Extensive road verges with a wide range of plant species characteristic of unimproved grassland. Nationally scarce plants, Sulphur clover, Bath asparagus and Crested cow-wheat all occur in good numbers. County Wildlife Site.

Management Keep road safety cutting to a minimum. Full width cut annually in late August or early September with cuttings removed.

Other considerations The adjacent farmer is sympathetic and trims the hedges annually. He has also been known to cut ditch side vegetation by hand to improve winter drainage without damaging the site. The ditch banks and bank at the base of the hedge are very important parts of this site. The parish council are protective of the site.
This is another wildlife site which is widely known and visited by naturalists from a wide area.

Site: **RAE Tunnel site** **Grid Reference:** **TL 024542**

Site Reference **NR/P/A/1-4**

Location: Cutting on both sides of the private road from Clapham to RAE Tunnel site

Special interest A good example of species rich neutral grassland on the cutting slopes

Management Annual full width cut in late August or early September with cuttings removed. Ensure that scrub does not invade the cutting slopes. Avoid damage to anthills on the slopes

Other considerations This is currently a private road and thus responsibility for management rests with the landowner, currently thought to be the owners of the RAE site.

Site: **South of Bushmead Cross** **Grid Reference:** **TL 110595**

Site Reference **NR/C5/A/1-2**

Location: Both sides of minor road from Colmworth to Little Staughton

Special interest A good example of species rich neutral grassland with strong orchid populations and a population of the nationally scarce Sulphur clover

Management Annual full width cut in late August or early September with cuttings removed. Scrub should be included in the flailing regime on the western verge. Any scrub that cannot be flailed on the western verge should be cut and the stumps killed. An area of scrub/grassland mosaic should be retained at the northern end of the eastern verge.

Other considerations The western verge has been damaged by the adjacent farmer dumping soil from the ditch on the site in the early 1990's. Indications are that it is beginning to recover well but the farmer is cultivating right up to the ditch edge and using an access across the verge thus spray drift and unseasonal mowing could be a problem on the western verge

Site: **Stagsden Bypass** **Grid Reference:** **SP 984491**

Site Reference **NR/A422/A/1-6**

Location: Both sides of Spring Lane exit to bypass, south of Spring Lane exit, along the bypass north of B560 around the balancing pond.

Special interest A substantial area of verge including a permanently flooded balancing pond and some areas seeded with wildflowers.

Management Annual full width cut of the wildflower seeded area in late August or early September with cuttings removed. No intervention needed at the balancing pond

Other considerations Local people were involved in growing and planting the wildflowers in both parts of the site and are protective towards it.

Site: **Stevington Turn** **Grid Reference:** **SP978514**

Site Reference **NR/A428/D/1**

Location North side of the A428 just west of a minor road to Stevington

Special interest A good example of a species rich neutral or slightly calcareous grassland. The site includes a substantial ditch and several poorly drained areas which add to the ecological value of the site.

Management Annual full width cut of the verge, including that part of the verge distant from the road between the ditch and the field hedge, in late August or September. All cuttings to be removed. The ditch banks may also need to be flailed regularly to prevent blockage and colonisation by trees.

Other considerations

Site: **Traylesfield Farm** **Grid Reference:** **TL 053552**

Site Reference **NR/UC294/A/1-2**

Location: Both sides of unclassified road west of Ravensden Wood End

Special interest A good example of species rich neutral grassland with a population of Elecampane

Management Annual full width cut of the verges on both sides of the road in late August or early September with cuttings removed. All scrub which is small enough should be cut with a flail. The western hedge should be trimmed back with a flail once every three years to prevent it spreading across and shading the verge.

Other considerations Some restoration work to remove scrub occurred during 2001.

Site: **Upper Staploe** **Grid Reference:** **TL 134597**

Site Reference **NR/C26/A/1-2**
NR/UC34/A/1-2

Location: Both sides of unclassified roads south of Duke's Spinney

Special interest A wood edge and species rich grassland site with a strong population of the nationally scarce Bath asparagus.

Management Annual full width cut in late August or early September with cuttings removed.

Other considerations The Parish council are protective of this site. The adjacent farmer trims hedgerows annually and has hand trimmed the ditch banks in the past as at Honeydon.

Site: Wilden (B660 verges) **Grid Reference:** TL 081562 - 090575

Site Reference NR/B660/A/1-3

Location: B660 Kimbolton Road. Three stretches between Shrubbery Lane and New Road

Special interest An extensive area of species rich neutral to calcareous grassland. County Wildlife Site.

Management Annual full width cut in late August or early September with cuttings removed. Road safety trimming to be kept to the minimum necessary. Grass cutting regime should include all young or small scrub. Occasional trimming of adjacent hedges may be needed

Other considerations The Wilden Parish Council are protective towards the shrubbery lane part of the site. The remainder is outside the parish. Trees planted on the main part of the verge are becoming large and may be damaging the grassland interest.

District Mid Bedfordshire

Site: A421/Marston Bypass Grid Reference SP 989410

Site Reference **NR/A421/A/1**
NR/A421/B/1-4

Location A wide verge where the bypass diverges from the original road into Marston Moretaine south of the village and a small area adjacent to a bridge over the road.

Special interest Areas seeded with wildflowers when the road was built

Management Annual full width cut in late August or September

Other considerations The Highways Agency currently manages the site as part of the trunk road network. The wildlife value of the site needs further investigation as there are indications that it may no longer merit inclusion as a verge nature reserve.

Site: Coopers Hill SSSI Grid Reference: TL 025375

Site Reference **SSSI/A507/E/1-2**
SSSI/B530/A/1-3

Location North of Station Road, along part of A507, along part of B530

Special interest Immediately adjacent to the SSSI and including similar habitat.

Management No special management regime

Other considerations English Nature must be consulted if planning any action which could affect the SSSI. Much of the SSSI is owned by Ampthill Town Council and managed by the Wildlife Trust as a Local Nature Reserve. Both need to be included in any discussion of action which could impact on the site.

