

Caring for Cumbria's roadside verges

Roadside verges in Cumbria are recognised as a valuable resource for wildlife and, as such, they need care and attention. As well as being a wildlife refuge, they are also greatly admired by locals and visitors, and are easily accessible to all.

Did you know?

Wildflowers don't need compost or fertilisers to thrive - quite the opposite. They like to grow in poor soils, and this is one reason why they grow on roadside verges.

In soils that are very rich, a few plants such as hogweed and nettle grow so well that other wildflowers can't compete with them.



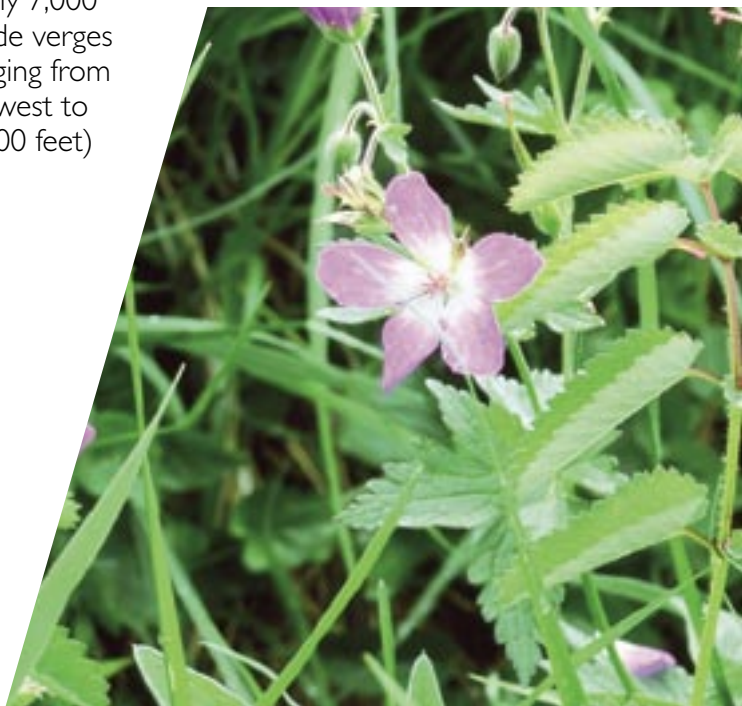
Nearly 500 species of wildflower have been recorded on Cumbria's roadside verges.



There are nearly 11,000km (nearly 7,000 miles) of roadside verges in Cumbria, ranging from sea level in the west to over 600m (2,000 feet) in the east.



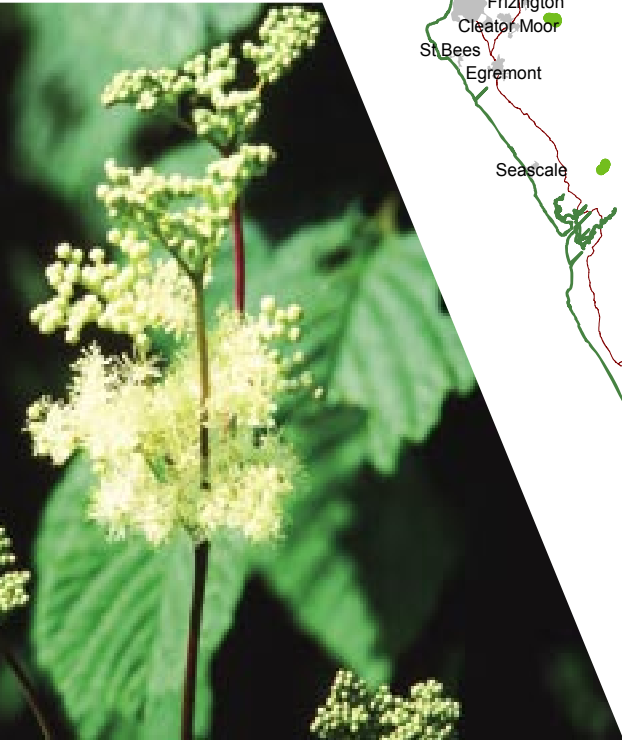
Melancholy thistle



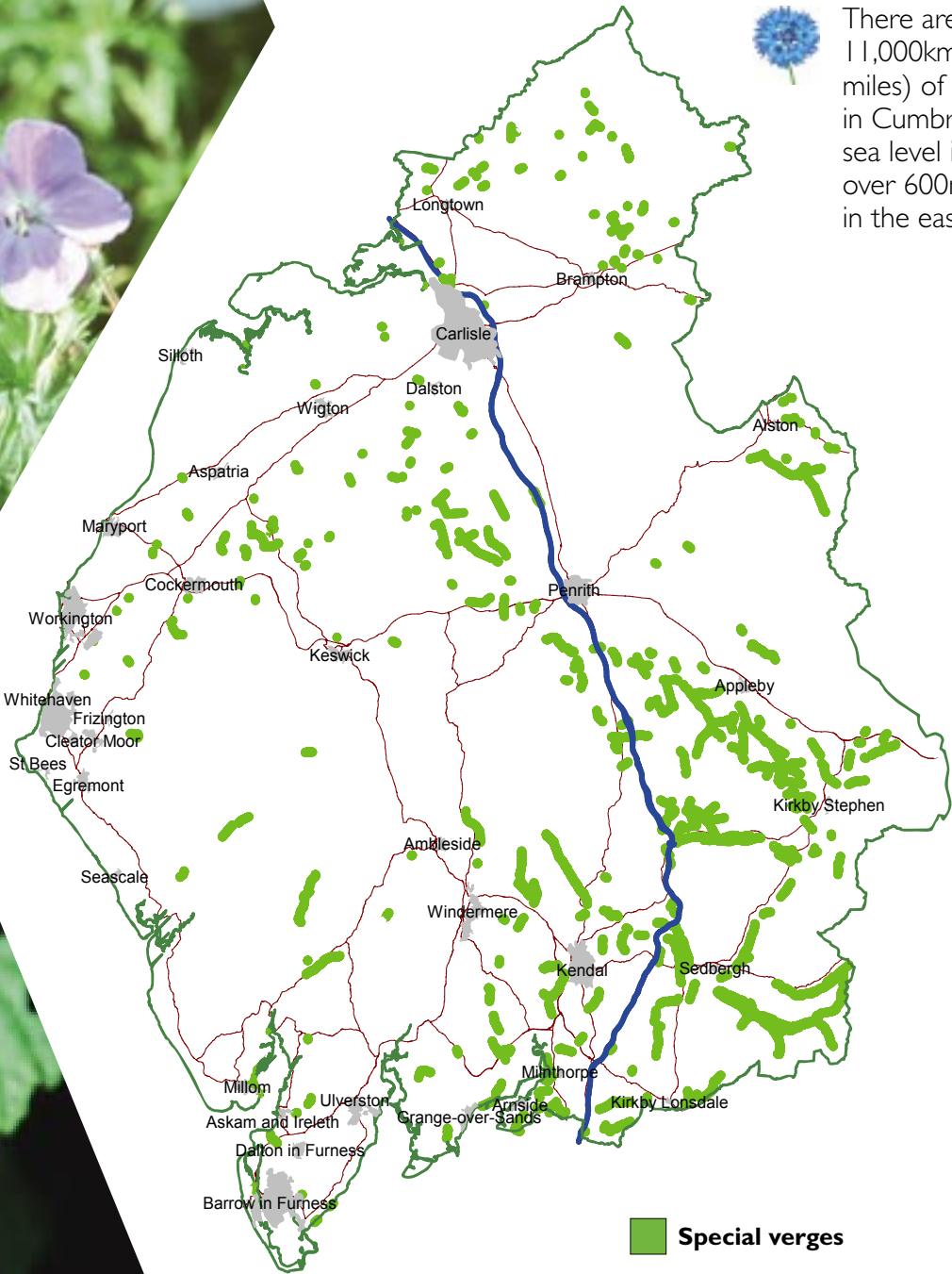
Wood crane's-bill



Meadow crane's-bill



Meadow sweet



The map shows special verges forming six per cent of the total length of country road verges in Cumbria, amounting to over 400 miles, and covering approximately 500 acres.



Since 2001, volunteers have surveyed 230 verges around the county.

How can you help to conserve Cumbria's roadside verges?

- Avoid driving on verges. This kills plants and damages the soil structure.
- Take an interest in your local verges, and talk to others about what you see.
- If you see someone damaging a verge near you and feel confident in approaching who is responsible, then have a word with him or her.
- If you don't know who is damaging a verge, or don't feel confident in approaching someone whom you know is responsible, then consider contacting one of the organisations listed overleaf.
- If you have a verge by your property, don't waste time and energy turning it into a lawn. Just enjoy what grows on the verge if you don't cut it regularly. The verge should be cut later in the year when wild flowers have seeded.
- Although it might seem like a public-spirited thing to do, please don't plant bulbs or other cultivated plants on roadside verges. Save them for your garden.

Other wildlife on the verges

Insects, small mammals and birdlife also thrive on our roadside verges. All contribute to Cumbria's biodiversity.



Bumble bee



Peacock butterfly

How can farmers help?

If you are a farmer then you can play a key role in the management of roadside verges by:

- Avoiding excessive cutting of verges
- Avoiding blanket spraying of verges
- Avoiding driving on verges
- Taking a late hay crop from wider verges (see the leaflet 'Farming and the public highway')
- Avoiding hedge cutting in wet conditions when machinery will rut the verge

Early-cut verges may look tidy, but provide a poor habitat for wildlife.





Meadow buttercup, Oxeye daisy, Tufted vetch

- step off the road when vehicles pass
- see traffic signs clearly
- see round bends and road junctions

and pedestrians can:
maintained for safety so that road users

It is also vital that roadside verges are
of wildlife-rich habitat together.
wildlife corridors. They help to link areas
an important part of the landscape, forming
of small mammals and birds. All verges are
Tall grassland verges also support a range
particularly abundant on flower-rich verges.
Insect life, especially bees and butterflies, is
provide strongholds for old hay meadow
species of flowers that have largely been
lost from our fields. Other verges include
woodland, wetland and bank habitats, with
their adjacent ditches, hedges and walls.

Why are roadside verges important?

How are verges looked after in Cumbria?



Lesser celandine

Cumbria County Council first surveyed roadside verges in the mid-90s. Cumbria Wildlife Trust volunteers are now repeating these surveys. This survey work is an important way of understanding and conserving our county's verges and wildlife heritage.

The information gained in the surveys helps the county council and others to respond more effectively to local concerns such as road works and other activities that might damage the verges.

The volunteers also help to monitor whether management is happening correctly.

Some stretches of verge that support a very good range of species or contain rare plants have been identified as special verges. Special care is given to protect and monitor their condition.

- Flower-rich verges are generally cut later in the year.
- Other types of verge may need an earlier cut.
- Every four years, a full width cut is made late in the year to prevent woody weeds and saplings growing, as these would shade out more delicate flowers. The full width cut is mainly for scrub control to protect the fabric of the road, but also protects the flower-richness.
- Over 600 Special Verges have their cuttings removed to reduce fertility and prevent a build up of a mat of vegetation, and so encourage a greater diversity of wildflowers.
- In order to maintain a safe and wildlife-rich road network, contractors work from maps showing which verges to cut and when. The county council assesses the work, and revises cutting times if necessary.

Why are verges cut at different times?

Every verge managed by Cumbria County Council is maintained under a cutting programme. The timing of this cut is planned to help protect the wildflowers on the verge. Some verges are cut early in the year, some in July, August or September. This will allow the flowers to flower and set seed, whilst also maintaining safety.

Who looks after Cumbria's roadside verges?

Cumbria County Council

"We organise our verge cutting in a way that encourages the conservation of their natural beauty. Since the mid-1990s, we have set out to manage our work in an environmentally friendly way. Verge conservation forms part of Cumbria County Council's contribution to the Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan."

Cumbria Wildlife Trust

"In 2002, the Trust, together with Cumbria County Council, developed a pilot roadside verge survey project. Over 50 volunteers from across the county 'adopted' stretches of 'special verges' and surveyed them for wildflowers. Such has been the enthusiasm for the county's roadside verges that the number of volunteers has doubled to over 100. We have now formed the Roadside Verges Volunteer Network which helps with events and publicity."

Farmers

"As custodians of the countryside, we play an important role in the management of field edges, of which roadside verges are an integral part. We can help by managing boundaries and adjacent land sensitively, and some of us are contracted to maintain their condition. Walls, banks and ditches are all wildlife habitats which we manage. Allowing thick hedges to flower and fruit helps birds with nest sites and winter food."

Contacts

Cumbria County Council
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CA3 8NA
www.cumbria.gov.uk

For ecological issues:
Environment Unit
Economy, Culture and Environment
County Offices, Kendal
Cumbria LA9 4RQ

Highways Hotline
Telephone: 0845 609 6609
www.cumbriahighways.co.uk

For volunteering and training:
Cumbria Wildlife Trust
Plumgarths
Crook Road, Kendal
Cumbria LA8 8LX
Telephone: 01539 816300
www.cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk

Water avens and Crosswort



Roadside verges in Cumbria

Not so tidy, but full of life

The sides of Cumbria's roads and footpaths are home to hundreds of species of wild plants and animals. This leaflet will help you understand more about what you might see and explains how we are working together to manage these important areas.