

We'll take *the Bee Road*

Our precious insects need to be able to travel - to find food, habitat and mates - and road verges are perfect pollinator 'corridors'. Now more and more councils are waking up to the idea of nurturing them, prompted by great campaigns...and great people power too.

By Kitty Corrigan

THIS SUMMER YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF ON A LONG DRIVE through the countryside to a staycation spot. When you arrive, check the bonnet and windscreen. In our parents' or grandparents' time, it would have been splattered with scores of insect corpses. This year – hardly any.

It's not that they've learned to avoid cars, it's that our insect numbers have plummeted, in only the last few decades, at a rate that amounts to 'insect-inction'.

Now it's dawning on more and more of us that we really need these bright and beautiful creatures – bees, beetles, hoverflies, moths, butterflies, wasps and more – to pollinate crops and flowers; to ensure heart-lifting birdsong continues and to help our mental health. From a little caterpillar to a soaring skylark – everything connects. But since the 1930s we've lost more than 97% of the meadowland where these precious insects used to thrive.

Though many farmers try their best with 'nature strips' around fields, many others still use pesticides – their use has risen by 80% since 1990 (though, interestingly, crop yields have not increased).

Insects are being squeezed out of the safe spaces they need to live and breed. Add in climate change, with its droughts and floods, and the outlook for our precious pollinators is grim.

More and more of us are gardening for wildlife – leaving lawns uncut, areas to grow wild, or planted as a mini meadow – a huge benefit to bees and pollinators. But gardeners alone can't stop the decline. And these oases can often be just that – small pools of life in a relative desert.

Bugs need to be able to travel, to forage and importantly to breed with other colonies to ensure a thriving gene pool rather than interbreed in a tiny fragment of land. It has been predicted that 40-70% of species could go extinct if action is not taken to enable them to move through the landscape.

What we need is a series of insect corridors: pathways criss-crossing throughout towns and countryside connecting habitats like a series of stepping-stones.

And it turns out that we have them: thousands of miles of them in fact - Britain's road verges.

In the same way that all the gardens in the UK add up to a massive resource for wildlife, so the area devoted to roadside verges has huge and underused potential. It's estimated that around 700 species of wildflowers grow on road verges, amounting to nearly 45% of our total flora.

Ben Phillips is lead author of a University of Exeter report which has calculated that verges in >

◁ England, Scotland and Wales account for 1,000 sq miles (2,579 sq km) of potential habitat. “The issue is that about a quarter of verges are mown regularly to make them look like garden lawns, and this is bad for wildlife,” he says.

Some mowing is necessary for safety reasons, but just think how much more enjoyable a boring car journey would be if the roads were lined with colourful, swaying wildflowers?

The good news is that dozens of charities, councils and authorities are now working together to re-think how we improve our management of this precious resource. Two campaigns in particular are taking off and already starting to change the scenery.

INSECT CHARITY BUGLIFE HAS SPENT TEN YEARS creating a UK map of B-lines (B for biodiversity) across the UK. It's designed to link existing wildlife areas, creating a network weaving across the country. It will provide large areas of brand-new habitat benefitting bees and butterflies and a host of other wildlife. The campaign aims to create,

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re-connect and restore at least 150,000 hectares of flower-rich habitat across the UK.

The goal is for B-lines to stretch from the south of England to the tip of Scotland. Buglife has liaised with landowners, local communities, councils, schools, highways agencies and wildlife organisations to pull it all together, helped by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

On Buglife's website you can see where your nearest B-line is on an online map and enter your own 'stepping stone', be it a wildlife-friendly garden, village green, business or community project.

WILDLIFE CHARITY PLANTLIFE'S BURGEONING ROAD VERGE CAMPAIGN has a similar aim. “If all the verges were managed for nature we would see an area the size of London, Manchester, Cardiff and Edinburgh combined adorned with wildflowers,” says Dr Trevor Dines, its botanical specialist. “This surge in pollen and nectar would have a genuinely transformative effect on the prospects for wildlife.”

The charity has beavered away since 2013, working with more than 30 councils and the UK's network of 46 Wildlife Trusts to create the go-to guide for verge management. It's aimed at local councils, highways authorities and community action groups and outlines the practicalities of when, how and where to cut verges, incorporating road safety and visibility.

It's also a great resource for frustrated individuals trying to change the mindsets of what's often dubbed 'the neat and tidy brigade' - be that a local council or householders wielding strimmers.

Dr Kate Petty, Plantlife's Road Verge Campaign Manager, takes a positive view however. “There really is a growing momentum and enthusiasm for change. People can be afraid to try new things. But when they realise money can be saved, that



PINNACLE OF ACHIEVEMENT
A Burnet Moth enjoys the fruits of Dorset council's innovative regime: the county's verges are now havens for half the butterfly species in the UK



THE A-TEAM
Dorset's cheerful council workers have installed signs on verges across the county featuring cartoon bumble bees, mice and other appealing wildlife explaining how their verge is being managed and thanking people for taking rubbish home.

householders are pushing for action and that there really is an ecological emergency, attitudes shift.

“We're increasingly seeing more parishes signing up, wanting to be more wildlife-friendly and councils adopting biodiversity strategies.

“It's slow but it's happening. Councils sharing information between themselves works well, we've found.”

WHEN IT COMES TO COUNCILS, DR PETTY CALLS DORSET 'A SHINING STAR'. It's innovative management regime now means their verges are havens for half the butterfly species in the UK, including the Small Blue, Adonis Blue and Chalkhill Blue. The Weymouth Relief Road in particular bristles with orchids and is a sight to inspire.

Ecologist Philip Sterling and Giles Nicholson, Dorset council's Green Space Manager, have adopted ancient hay-making principles. It's low-tech, cheap and effective - ideally cut twice a year in spring and then late summer once plants have bloomed and seeded.

Special mowers gather up and remove the



6 ways you can be a part of it

There are plenty of ways in which you can help accelerate the various 'corridor' initiatives

1 Plantlife has produced *The Good Verge Guide*, a go-to practical guide of how best to manage you local verges. The charity is also running a petition with 130,000+ signatures so far. Find it all on plantlife.org.uk/roadvergecampaign. Follow the [#RoadVerges](https://twitter.com/RoadVerges) hashtag on social media, too.

2 Check out where you are on the B-line map and see if you can help evolve it. See buglife.org.uk

3 Join a work party run by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust bumblebeeconservation.org

4 Enhance your local railway station. See the beefriendlytrust.org

5 Volunteer with your local Wildlife Trust and check out their website. There's an excellent free *Community Guide to Taking Action for Insects* guide there to help budding change-makers. wildlifetrusts.org

6 Support charities and other hard-working organisations by becoming a member if you can afford it, buying from their shops and following them on social media.

clippings to reduce the fertility of the soil (wild flowers need a low nutrient habitat). Then wait and let nature do the rest.

Sterling, Programme Manager for the Butterfly Conservation charity, is on a mission to take the model to any local authority that will listen. And with Dorset's maintenance costs reduced from nearly £1m to £650k in five years, councils are all ears. The 'cut and collect' regime is slowly being adopted across the UK.

The state-owned Highways England company has also listened - and now all new large-scale road projects are adopting a similar grasslands policy.

Contractors for the nationwide authority will be obliged to create conditions for species-rich grasslands to thrive using low fertility soils with chalk and limestone bases. The verges will then be allowed to regenerate naturally or be seeded with the correct local mix of native wildflowers.

“Verges will look different under this approach,” said Ben Hewlett, Highways England environmental adviser. “The new-look verges will be all over the

The three-year Lottery-funded 'Making a Buzz for the Coast' campaign finished in Spring and connected up an amazing 135 miles of Kent coastline, from Dartford to Deal

country and provide ecological connectivity.” The company is also altering the times of their mowing regimes to further promote biodiversity on the roads it manages.

It's not only verges that matter. Apiarist Dr Luke Dixon, who looks after bees at the Royal Academy of Music in London, is co-founder of the Bee Friendly Trust. He started out planting pollinator tubs at railway stations and the popularity of his first flowerbed for bees in Putney, West London - built with, appropriately, railway sleepers - has led his charity to work with train operating companies all the way north to Durham.

Buddleia, which insects love, already grows wild along many railway lines, seeds from other plants are transported along tracks, and free seeds are given to railway staff and local volunteers to plant. Not only does it make waiting on a platform more pleasant, it turns the rail network into a series of pitstops along an insect pathway.

THOUGH ENLIGHTENED PEOPLE MIGHT DESPAIR at the strimming and scalping that still goes on, the success of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust's recent project is encouraging. The three-year Lottery-funded 'Making a Buzz for the Coast' campaign finished in Spring and connected an amazing 135 miles of Kent coastline, from Dartford to Deal - powered by volunteers. They contacted landowners and farmers, community groups and local authorities to restore habitat for bumblebees in an area where 22 of the UK's 24 species live - five of them rare, such as the Shril Carder Bee.

It shows that people power can make a real difference. Clearly, creating wildflower verges is not a substitute for a national strategy and the serious action needed to tackle the nature and climate crises we face. But it's a step along the way. ♦