

THE NEED FOR CAREFUL PLANNING, MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION OF WESTMEATH'S HEDGEROW RESOURCE

- ❑ Certain hedges need to be given extra emphasis for conservation purposes. For example townland boundary hedges and hedges that have high species richness should be safeguarded more stringently in roads, construction, and other developments.
- ❑ If hedgerow extent and quality are not to decline further, then the levels of hedgerow rejuvenation (hedge laying, coppicing and infilling of gaps) will need to increase significantly. Westmeath has a strong tradition of laying hedges which should be encouraged and developed.
- ❑ Cutting hedgerows to a height of less than 1.5m during routine maintenance should be discouraged. Breasting hedges but allowing the top to grow freeform is a form of management that can satisfy both agricultural and ecological functions. It is also well suited for the management of many roadside hedges.
- ❑ Cutting during the hedges' growing season can reduce the vigour of the plants that make up the hedge. The bird nesting season runs from March 1st to August 31st. Not cutting during this period benefits hedges and their associated wildlife.
- ❑ New hedges must be well looked after in the years after they are planted if they are to survive and grow. Any new planting should use local, native plants. Plants such as Spindle, Hazel, Crab Apple and Guelder Rose increase diversity and benefit wildlife and landscape.
- ❑ Roadside trees will need to be routinely assessed for their potential hazard, so that risks can be dealt with constructively and the aesthetic and wildlife value of this important resource protected.

WESTMEATH'S HEDGES ARE A WONDERFUL RESOURCE,
LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY!

For further information or copy of full survey report contact the Heritage Office at Westmeath Co. Council on 044 32077, heritage@westmeathcoco.ie, www.westmeathcoco.ie.

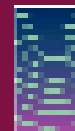
COUNTY WESTMEATH'S HEDGES

A summary of the work and findings of the Co. Westmeath Hedgerow Survey Report 2005

An action of the Co. Westmeath Heritage Plan 2003 - 2007



SUPPORTED BY THE HERITAGE COUNCIL



LE CUIDIÚ AN CHOMHAIRLE OIDHREACHTA

HISTORY

THE HISTORY OF HEDGEROWS IN COUNTY WESTMEATH

Hedgerows are a relatively recent feature in the Irish landscape although some raths dating from around 1000 AD were planted with blackthorn and hawthorn to support defense. In medieval times hedgerows were used to mark the boundaries of townlands and occasionally as stock-proof field boundaries. The pattern of hedge-bound fields that is so characteristic of the Co. Westmeath landscape originated mainly during the mid 1700s. Land was further enclosed during the agricultural improvements of the early 1800s and again through the work of the Land Commission in the early 20th century.

THE VALUE OF HEDGES IN COUNTY WESTMEATH



Westmeath has a unique and distinctive hedgerow heritage, with many hedges being planted in to or alongside a dry stone wall and the stems laid along top this wall. 24% of hedges surveyed show evidence of having been laid in the past. Westmeath's hedges are a valuable asset to the county, adding much to the scenic appearance of the landscape and providing many services on the farm. The root systems of hedgerow trees and shrubs regulate water movement in the land and improve the quality of water. Hedgerows are also enormously important for wildlife. They are a habitat for insects like butterflies and bumblebees, and provide food, shelter, and nesting sites for birds, from small songbirds to larger birds of prey like the Kestrel and Sparrowhawk. Mammals such as wood mice, hedgehogs, badgers, and bats also depend on hedges for their survival.

A hedge laid in traditional Westmeath style.

HEDGEROW SURVEY

THE WESTMEATH HEDGEROW SURVEY IN 2004

Westmeath County Council carried out a County Hedgerow Survey as part of the Westmeath Heritage Plan, 2003-2007. Along with a similar survey in County Roscommon, these are the first of their kind in the Republic of Ireland and are a major step towards hedgerow conservation in these two counties.

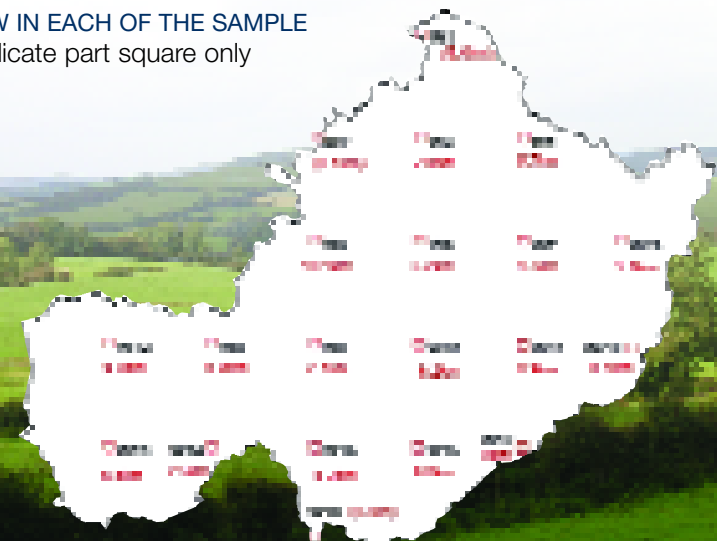
A total of 29 sample squares were recorded, (24 full 1km² and 5 part squares on the county boundaries). The survey investigated the extent, floristic composition, structure, condition, and management of hedgerows in each county. Public consultation was held in order to gauge people's views and concerns about the hedges of their county. The information will benefit a wide range of end users in each county, including farmers, landowners, foresters, planners, developers, research and advisory bodies.

THE EXTENT OF HEDGES IN COUNTY WESTMEATH

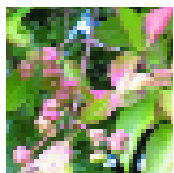
The average length of hedge in a square kilometre in County Westmeath is 5.82 kilometres. From these results it can be estimated that there are 10,481km kilometres of hedgerow in the whole county. There is a further 1,126km of remnant (the remains of) hedgerows in the county.

LENGTH OF HEDGEROW IN EACH OF THE SAMPLE SQUARES

Brackets indicate part square only



THE FLORA OF WESTMEATH'S HEDGEROWS



WOODY SHRUB SPECIES

% FREQUENCY

Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) 99

Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) 58

Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) 41

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) 33

Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*) 33

Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) 16

Damson (*Prunus domestica*) 14

Willow (*Salix species*) 12

Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) 10

Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) 9

Elm (*Ulmus glabra*) 7

Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) 7

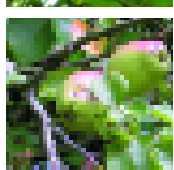
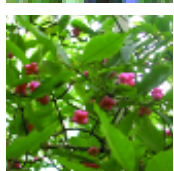
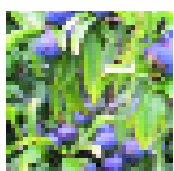
Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos rivularis*) 4

Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) 4

Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) 2

Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*) 2

Yew (*Taxus baccata*) 0.7



THE OCCURENCE OF SHRUBBY SPECIES IN HEDGEROWS

(These figures do not include trees)

Roadside and townland boundary hedges were found to contain a greater diversity of native shrub species than other hedges. This is due to earlier establishment in the landscape as many roads date back to before the period of land enclosure.

TREES

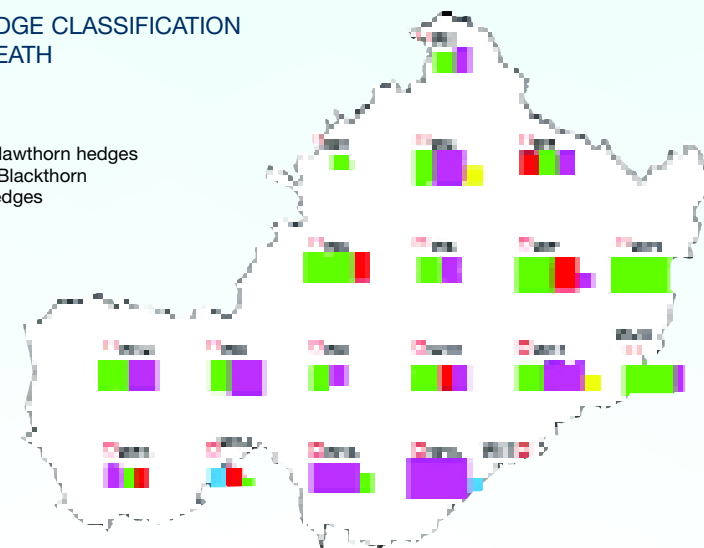
The most common hedgerow tree in County Westmeath is the Ash, found in 62% of hedges. Beech and Sycamore, both non-native trees, are the second most frequently occurring tree species (14%). Oak, Willow, Birch, Holly, Damson, Alder, Horse Chestnut, Wild Cherry, Crab Apple and Rowan are also found.

DISTRIBUTION OF HEDGE CLASSIFICATION TYPES IN COUNTY WESTMEATH

DISTRIBUTION OF HEDGE CLASSIFICATION TYPES IN CO. WESTMEATH

Key

- Group 1 - Willow hedges
- Group 2 - Species poor Hawthorn hedges
- Group 3 - Hawthorn and Blackthorn
- Group 4 - Species rich hedges
- Group 5 - Gorse hedges



Five main types (or groups) of hedges were identified across Westmeath. Hedges of the Willow group were found only in the south of the County. There is a good proportion of the species rich group across the County, but especially in the south.



THE STRUCTURE AND CONDITION OF WESTMEATH'S HEDGEROWS



Derelict hedge with potential for improvement.

Many hedges in the county are structurally poor, with a total of 24% being classed as either derelict or remnant (remains of what was once a hedge).

Without management intervention derelict hedges will become remnants and die out in time. The majority of the county's hedges have a lot of gaps along their length, with almost a third of hedges containing more than 25% gaps. The condition of these hedges detracts from their functional value in containing stock and value to wildlife.

These figures are warning signals that a significant proportion of hedges in the county are under threat from abandonment, and may be lost without careful planning and intervention.

LINKS WITH OTHER HABITATS

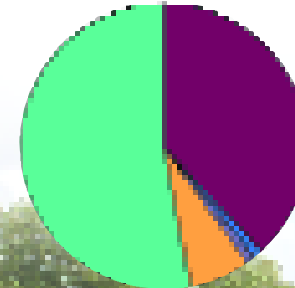
The corridor role of hedgerows in facilitating the movement and distribution of wild flora and fauna through the landscape is believed to be enhanced significantly if hedgerows link into other habitat features. 14% of hedges surveyed in Co. Westmeath had end links with habitats (other than hedgerows).

THE STRUCTURE AND CONDITION OF WESTMEATH'S HEDGEROWS

HEDGEROW MANAGEMENT

86% of Westmeath hedges surveyed form part of active farm boundaries. Just over half of hedges in Co. Westmeath were found to be long term unmanaged (over 10 years); many have not been managed for decades. At the other end of the scale, a fifth of the county's hedges are less than 1.5 metres tall. This form of severe management negatively impacts the long term health of hedges and has little benefit for wildlife. If a hedge is kept short and narrow it reduces the amount of nesting space, food source and cover from predators vital for small birds and mammals.

A BREAKDOWN OF THE MANAGEMENT OF HEDGES



THE METHOD OF HEDGEROW MANAGEMENT IN COUNTY WESTMEATH

