Hedgelink visit to Suffolk, England, 12-13 July 2011

Report of field visits

Introduction

Hedgelink, the Steering Group for the UK hedgerow Biodiversity Action Plan, met in Suffolk on 12 and 13 July 2011. Following an indoor meeting, we visited two farms, both in East Suffolk. On the afternoon of the first day we went to Dennington Hall Farms near Bruisyard, and on the morning of the next day Stanny House Farm near Iken. This report summarises these two visits – the indoor meeting will be reported separately.

The field visits were kindly arranged by Anne Westover, Landscape Officer for Suffolk Coastal District Council. Those attending both visits were Andrea Graham (NFU), Clare Collyer (CLA), Emma Marrington (CPRE), Emily Ledder (Natural England), Jim Jones (Surrey Wildlife Trust), Jim Taylor (Tree Warden for Leiston), John Stratton (Defra), Peter Ogden (Defra), Rob Wolton (Devon Hedge Group) and Steve Gray (Defra). Ann Westover, Glyn Button (Tree Warden for Leiston), John Mc… (Tree Warden for Bruisyard), Jon Stokes (Tree Council) and Nigel Adams (National Hedge Laying Society), joined us at Dennington Hall Farms. At Stanny House Farm we were joined by Rodney West (Representative for Stanny House Farm), Maggie Grenham (Representative for Stanny House Farm) and Paula Wolton.

Dennington Hall Farms

Hedgelink members admiring a mature hawthorn hedge at Dennington Hall Farm

We are indebted to our host, Robert Rous, for giving us a guided tour of hedges and other features on this his family's farm. This tour included transport on a trailer with bale seating.

The farms occupy some 1,300 ha on heavy clay land. It is predominantly arable, with the main crops being wheat, oilseed rape and spring beans. The farm benefits from a Higher Level Stewardship agreement which has enabled the establishment of 6m margins around many of the fields. Turtle doves are among the priority species present. Other landscape features include 100 farm ponds excavated by the owners to encourage wildlife.

Coppiced hedge with retained trees and 6m field margin at Dennington Hall Farms

The main focus of our attention was the practice of hedgerow coppicing, the predominant means of rejuvenating hedges in Suffolk and the only means practiced on this farm. The hedges contain a mix of species, hawthorn predominating but with a wide mix of other species including elm and field maple. When the hedge trees are about 40 – 50 years old, they are coppiced using a tractor mounted rotary saw. The cut material is lifted out of the way with tractor- mounted grab. The firewood is then extracted (material in excess of about 10cm diameter), and the remainder burnt on site.

Coppiced hedgerow stool in hedge at Dennington Hall Farms

After coppicing the hedges on the farm are lightly trimmed even in the first years, to thicken them at the base. At each cut the height is increased slightly up until the final desired height. Only hedges with a north- south orientation are allowed to become high due to crop shading problems on east-west hedges. However, we noted than wide field margins not only make it more practical to cut hedges during the winter months, but also mean that crop shading is much less of a problem - so north-south hedges can be allowed increase in height without economic impact.

Although the farm has strong brown hare and deer populations, with red, fallow and muntjac deer being present, re-growth from coppice stools was generally sufficient to restore the hedge and indeed may have helped ensure a thick base.

As a consequence of coppicing hedges at the right stage (before the trees become moribund) and a careful cutting programme we observed that the hedges on the farm are in excellent condition, with thick growth right from the base. This contrasts sharply with the situation seen in Normandy where the re-growth from coppiced hedges is usually not cut, resulting in hedges that are thin and gappy.

The wood from the hedges is considered superior for use in log-burning stoves than that from conifer plantations on the estate – wood from these plantations is chipped and used on farm in a boiler for grain drying and other farm uses. A heaped small wheel-based Landrover load of logged firewood currently sells for about £75 a tonne, which is considered to be scarcely worth the while but better than £5 a load for uncut green wood.

Another particular feature of the farm is large numbers of hedgerow trees, predominantly oak. Many of these have been coppiced in the past and are now several hundred years old. We discussed the benefits of removing dead timber from stag-headed trees, and concluded that such material rarely poses a safety risk yet has considerable wildlife value, so should be retained where possible. When hedges are coppiced, trees are left at regular intervals, ensuring that there is a balanced age structure on the farm.

Ancient oak hedgerow pollard at Dennington Hall Farms

Mr Rous explained that the hedges were a defining and valued part of the farm. However, if it were not for the Hedgerow Regulations, he would have removed a hedge that divided an 8 ha field into two, because modern arable machinery is difficult to operate in fields of less than this size. The inflexibility of the Hedgerow Regulations is, he finds, at times unnecessarily constraining.

Mr Rous demonstrating flail cutting head

At the end of our visit we were shown the impressively-large farm machinery, including the combine. This has a width of 15 feet, necessitating gateways off roads to be at least 16ft wide. To avoid having to take the 35 ft wide cutting head off, internal field entrances should preferably be this wide, although where the hedges are cut low on either side the head can be lifted over them by the combine.

Recently coppiced hedge

Retained dead hedgerow oak

Stanny House Farm

Hedgelink members admire species-rich natural regeneration margin at Stanny House Farm. Note dead hedge on right-hand side.

We are very grateful to Rodney West and Maggie Grenham for leading us on a guided walk around this farm, with the kind permission Paul and Loulou Cooke the farm owners. Rodney has recorded wildlife, including through bird ringing, since 1985 and provides advice to the current owner on environmental management. Together with Maggie they have planted and cared for several kilometres of new hedge on the farm.

Stanny House Farm is on the southern side of the Alde estuary. It covers 300 ha, half of which is grazing marsh under ESA agreement, and half of which is arable land under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. The soils are sandy loams and the main crops are onions, carrots, potatoes and rye.

Of particular interest to us from a hedgerow perspective was the relationship between the farm hedgerows and field margins/wild bird seed plots, and the methods by which new hedgerows are established.

Maggie Grenham and Rodney West demonstrate their methods of establishing new hedges

New hedgerows are established as follows: A strip of woven plastic perhaps 1m wide is laid along the length of the strip to be planted, to suppress weeds and retain moisture, with slots being cut at regular intervals for the whips. At each slit a planting hole is made using a bulb planter and the whip inserted together with a small quantity of good quality soil incorporating chicken manure. Rabbit spirals are used. Experience has shown that clear plastic spirals are more effective than brown ones, and warrant the slightly increased cost. Using this method, establish rates are remarkably high, with only 1% of plants being lost. Although there is a strong deer population on the farm, including muntjac and Chinese water deer, and numerous hares, the young hedgerow plants generally succeed in getting away despite being nibbled at the top of the rabbit spirals. The spirals are generally removed when the shrubs are about finger-thick.

The planting mix for new hedgerows was discussed and the consensus was that even though the tradition in the area was for pure hawthorn hedges, given current objectives it was appropriate to use a wide range of native plants. Previously horse chestnuts had been planted at intervals along hedges, and the proposal was to remove these as inappropriate and non-native hedging plants. Current planting tends to be at 40 cm spacing along each of two rows – again this was considered appropriate to the primary objective of creating good wildlife habitat rather than stock-proof barriers.

Most hedgerows on the farm are cut regularly on the instruction of the owner in the interests of tidiness, although a significant proportion is left uncut to increase cover for birds. Newly-established hedgerows are cut every other year or so, to ensure they develop and thick bushy habit. We discussed the merits of cutting down new hedges close to the ground where there is an obvious gap caused by the use of rabbit spirals, and concluded that this was desirable but not at the risk of all the regeneration being eaten off by hares and deer. We noted that leaving tall herbs and grass alongside the hedge reduces the risk of such browsing, and also that laying the young hedge would increase the protection to young shoots.

New hedge with young oak (left) and dead elm trunk with little owl nesting site retained in hedge (right)

6m grassland margins have been established either by planting or natural regeneration along many of the hedgerows on the farm. In places these have become remarkably species-rich and colourful, reflecting the infertile sandy soil. These are used by the several pairs of barn owls which breed on the farm. In addition numerous wide marginal strips and field corners are carefully managed to produce wild bird food or as pollen and nectar sources. Experience shows that wild bird plots are much more heavily used by finches and buntings when close to hedges where the birds can quickly find refuge from predators, demonstrating the synergy that can be achieved between the two habitats.

Wild bird seed plot adjacent to species-rich hedge

Currently there is no programme of hedgerow coppicing on the farm, although the intention is to re-introduce this practice. We saw one hedge at the right stage for coppicing, and at risk through becoming moribund if left unmanaged for much longer.

Jim Jones admires old coppiced hawthorn in hedgerow

Conclusion

Hedgelink members were enormously impressed with the high standard of hedgerow management and condition at both farms, and both visits have considerably advanced our understanding of particular hedgerow management practices, in particular coppicing and planting, and the relationship between hedgerows, grass margins, wild bird seed plots and pollen and nectar plots.

We are very grateful to the owners of both farms, and to all those who showed us around, for their time, expertise and enthusiasm.

Robert Wolton

Hedgelink

15 July 2011