



Living on the hedge

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First light and an early winter mist lies softly the fields. Along the track the low sun is backlighting frosted cobwebs and the frozen stalks of last summer's hogweed. Redwings and fieldfares, as well as our resident thrushes, take flight from the hedges as I approach. I have interrupted their gorging on a bounty of berries. Sloe, haw, hip and holly are all on the menu, these thorny thickets providing a rich larder for birds that have flocked from harsher climes to spend their winter with us.

Other birds take advantage of these hedges at this time of year, too. At sunset, hundreds of chattering starlings will take up their roosting stations deep within the intricate tangle of shrubs and climbers. Here they are protected from whatever the elements have in store over the long winter nights. Insects in various life stages are also holed-up. Some careful exploration and you may find dormant ladybirds tucked deep into bark crevices or the tiny eggs of the brown hairstreak butterfly lodged in the fork of a blackthorn branch. Meanwhile hidden away at ground level hedgehogs, toads, and newts are using the security of the dense vegetation for their seasonal slumber.

Later in the year our hedge will become a riot of colour, movement and aromatic scents with bees and butterflies visiting the flowers of campion, bramble and honeysuckle. Long-tailed tits, wrens and yellowhammers will be busily raising their broods; shrews and voles will be feeding, sheltering and defending their territories. But all that has yet to unfold, and for now much of life lies waiting.

Thousands of miles of hedgerows such as this criss-cross our country in a familiar and historical patchwork landscape. Rich in wildlife, this network of green highways links the habitats and populations of so many species, all living 'on the hedge'.

Farming on the hedge

Hedgerows are a vital part of the farming landscape, providing food and shelter to countless birds, mammals and insects. Bird food supplier and Wildlife Trust partner, Vine House Farm, provide a haven for tree sparrows and other wildlife in their hedges. Plus, with every purchase made supporting The Wildlife Trusts, the farm is helping wildlife beyond the farm gate. Find out more here:



[wildlifetrusts.org/vine-house-farm](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/vine-house-farm)

ILLUSTRATION BY BETH KNIGHT



Brimstone

One of a handful of UK butterflies that overwinter as adults, tucked away in ivy. They can even be seen flying on sunny days in winter. The caterpillars feed on alder buckthorn.

Hedgehog

Hedgehogs will often choose the base of a thick hedgerow to site their hibernaculum to sleep away the colder months. In milder winters they may be seen out and about as late as December.

Stoat

These fierce predators are active all year round. They use hedge lines to hunt small rodents and rabbits, although when food is scarce may resort to foraging for earthworms.





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Fieldfare

Winter visitors from the semi-arctic regions where they breed, these grey-blue thrushes will often arrive in mixed flocks along with redwings to feed on berries.

House sparrow

Both house sparrows and tree sparrows use dense hedges for roosting spots, protection from predators and even as nest sites when favoured holes and crevices aren't available.

Ivy

This late-flowering evergreen has much to offer wildlife in autumn and winter. Autumn nectar sustains bees, juicy berries feed birds long after other fruits have been snapped up, and dense foliage provides a home for hibernating bats and insects.

Dormouse

Well-managed hedgerows are vital corridors for many species and none more so than the dormouse. As well as a secure hibernation site, the hedge will provide them with many of the fruits, nuts and insects in their diet.

Orange ladybird

This distinctive ladybird is among the many insects that hibernate in leaf litter at the base of hedges. Other species of ladybird will be under bark or nestled within thick beds of lichen.

