

Tufted Vetch *Vicia cracca*



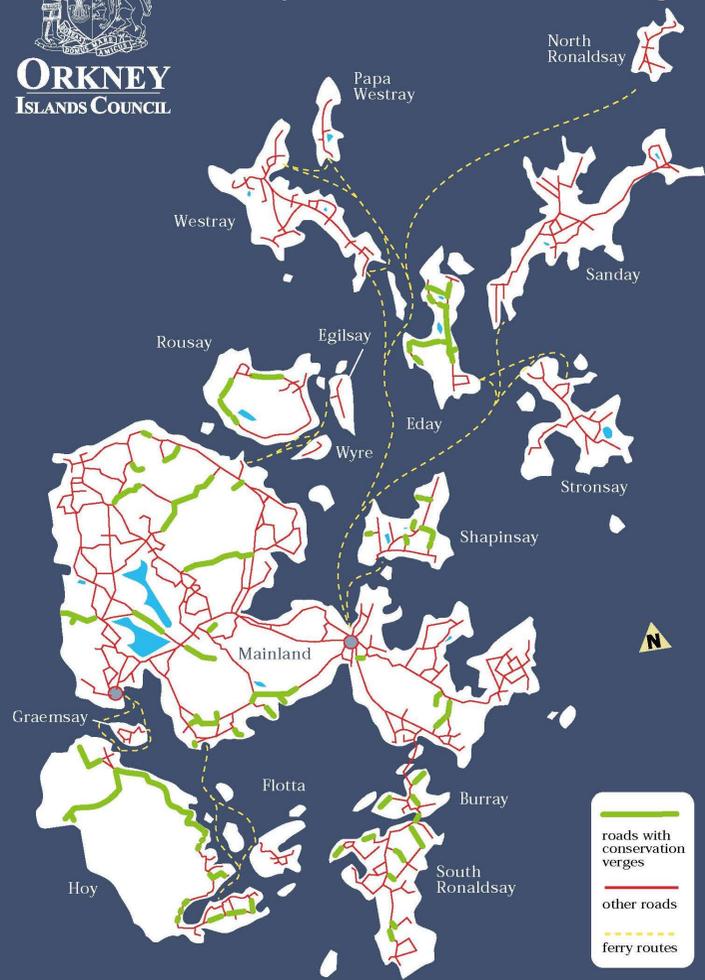
Redshank *Tringa totanus*



Bell Heather *Erica cinerea*



# Orkney's conservation verges



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# Orkney's Roadside Verges



## How can you help to conserve Orkney's roadside verges?

- Avoid driving on verges. This kills plants and damages the soil structure.
- If you have a verge by your property, enjoy its naturalness - the verge may be cut later in the year when wild flowers have seeded.
- Take an interest in your local verges and try to identify the plants you see.

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cover images: top Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*  
bottom Slender St. John's Wort *Hypericum pulchrum*

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# Orkney's roadside verges

## Primrose

*Primula vulgaris*

With its clusters of pale yellow blooms above soft, wrinkled leaves, the Primrose is one of the first wildflowers to appear in spring time. Flowering between March and June, it is a welcome sight following the dark days of winter.



## Red Campion

*Silene dioica*

Common on roadside verges and rocky ground, the rosy-pink flowers of Red Campion can be seen all summer and into autumn.



## Ragged Robin

*Lychnis flos-cuculi*

Ragged Robin is a medium/tall perennial which flowers from May through to August. The narrow 'ragged' red petals appear tattered and give the plant its name. It is a favoured flower of butterflies but resists attack by crawling insects such as ants by having barbed stems, with downward pointing hairs.



## Northern Marsh Orchid

*Dactylorhiza purpurella*

The bright purple Northern Marsh Orchid is easily recognised and wonderful displays of these flowers can often be found in damp grassland and along roadsides. Its blooms appear from May until July.



## Bird's-foot Trefoil

*Lotus corniculatus*

Bird's-foot Trefoil is a common perennial which thrives in short grassland and on roadside verges. It is often found beside clovers and is very drought-resistant. It has a long flowering season and can be seen from May until September.



## Red Clover

*Trifolium pratense*

Red Clover is an important food source for many insect species, attracting butterflies, moths and other long-tongued insects, particularly bumblebees. Its leaves also provide food for the caterpillars of several moths and butterflies. Like Bird's-foot Trefoil this sweet-smelling and colourful plant has a long flowering season which lasts from May until September.



## Common Blue Butterfly

*Polyommatus icarus*

This, the commonest of the European blues, flies from June until August in all kinds of grassy countryside. The male has a violet-blue upper side with narrow black margins, while its underside usually has a white stripe in the centre of its hind wing. The female is brown, with a variable amount of blues at the base of its wings. The larva feeds on plants such as Bird's-foot Trefoil and Red Clover.



## Green-veined White Butterfly

*Pieris napi*

Flying from May until September, this butterfly is easily identified by the green veins on its underside. The female normally has two spots on the upper side of its front wing. Adults occur widely but they tend to congregate in damp, lush vegetation where their food plants, which include Cuckoo Flower, are found - especially ditches, damp meadows and moorland.

## Great Yellow Bumblebee

*Bombus distinguendus*

The Great Yellow Bumblebee is becoming increasingly rare, probably because of habitat loss to modern agricultural practices, and is found only in Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and in tiny populations on the northern coast of mainland Scotland. Its food sources include Red Clover, Knapweed and Kidney Vetch and other wildflowers which are found on roadside verges and in lightly grazed areas such as coastal machair. *photograph: J Crossley*



## Knapweed

*Centaurea nigra*

The bee shown in this photograph is feeding from a flower of Knapweed, a plant which is not very common in Orkney. Its purple, thistle-like blooms open from flower heads which resemble small bristly pineapples. Knapweed can be found during late summer in a variety of places including pastures, waste ground and roadside verges where the grass is not too closely cropped. The flowers are pollinated by bees, flies, moths and butterflies.



## Orkney Vole

*Microtus arvalis orcadensis*

As its name suggests, the Orkney Vole is unique to Orkney and its closest relative is the Common Vole which is found throughout continental Europe. Measuring between 10 and 13 cm, and weighing between 30 and 70g, the Orkney Vole is twice the size of the Field Vole found on mainland Britain. With a diet of leaves, stems and roots of a wide variety of plants, Orkney Voles require areas of semi-natural vegetation, such as rough grassland, in order to survive. These small, brown rodents also appear to favour surprisingly wet habitats and can be found in the ditches along roadside verges.



## Grass-of-Parnassus

*Parnassia palustris*  
The Grass-of-Parnassus, a member of the Saxifrage family, is found during late summer in grasslands and grassy heathers on moist soils. The starry creamy-white flowers with dark veins make it an easily identifiable plant.



## Eyebright

*Euphrasia officinalis*

There are many different Eyebrights - some of them grow to ankle-height, others are diminutive. Most of them have tiny purplish-red or white flowers tinged with yellow and bloom between July and September.



## Cuckoo Flower

*Cardamine pratensis*

Cuckoo Flower, is so-called because it flowers from April to June, at the same time as the Cuckoo starts to call. Another name for this pretty flower is Lady's Smock. It grows up to 24 inches high and can be found in damp grassy places.



## Kidney Vetch

*Anthyllis vulneraria*

This low-growing member of the pea family has unusual flower heads; they are formed in two parts with one side coming into bloom while the other has semi-ripened seeds. Also known as Ladies' Fingers, this plant flowers from April until September.



## Meadowsweet

*Filipendula ulmaria*

The creamy yellow flowers of Meadowsweet have a very sweet scent which fills the air between August and September, attracting many insects. Meadowsweet is particularly common in damp areas.



## Devil's-bit Scabious

*Succisa pratensis*

The pretty pale lilac-blue flowers of Devil's-bit appear from late July until early autumn and are attractive to bees. Its name refers to the abrupt ending of the rootstock which appears to have been bitten.

# How are roadside verges looked after in Orkney?

Maintenance of the County's roadside verges, ditches and drainage channels (offlets) is the responsibility of Orkney Islands Council's Roads Department.

Verge cutting is carried out throughout the summer months, from May until September using a tractor-mounted mower. During autumn any overgrown drainage channels are cleared in preparation for the wetter months of winter.



verge in June

The cutting of vegetation on verges is carried out primarily for road safety purposes and to provide a refuge for pedestrians walking along the road.

However, under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004, Orkney Islands Council also has a duty '*...to further the conservation of biodiversity...*'

This means that in carrying out its day to day functions the Council should incorporate measures to help preserve the wildlife species which presently live in Orkney, and the most effective way to do this is to protect their natural habitats.

Through careful planning of verge maintenance it is possible to protect visibility and safety on the roads whilst also allowing abundant verge wildlife to flourish.

## What is the length of roadside verge in Orkney?

Throughout the Orkney Islands there are over 1125 miles of roadside verges amounting to an area of at least 525 ha.

## Why are roadside verges important?

Many roadside verges in Orkney were originally grasslands and now provide refuges for species of flowers and other plants that have largely been lost from our fields. Other verges border moorlands and wetlands and can support an interesting range of plants which are not found in the more developed areas of our landscape.

Along with their adjacent ditches, banks and, in some instances, stone dykes, verges support thriving ecosystems, providing valuable habitat and refuge for many species of plants, fungi, mammals, birds and insects.

Insect life, especially bees and butterflies, is particularly abundant on flower-rich verges. Verges with taller grassland also support a range of small mammals and birds. All verges are an important part of the landscape, forming wildlife corridors and helping to link areas of wildlife-rich habitat together.

It is also essential that roadside verges are maintained for the safety of all road users, so that:

- There is adequate visibility at road junctions and round bends;
- Traffic signs can be clearly seen; and
- Pedestrians can safely step off the road when vehicles pass.

The ditches along roadside verges are a further important element of the road system, carrying surface water to burns and streams and helping to prevent flooding.

## Why are verges cut at different times?

Every verge managed by Orkney Islands Council is maintained under a cutting programme. The timing of this cut is planned to maintain road safety whilst also allowing plants to flower and set seed. Under the programme, all main 'A' Class roadside verges are cut three times per year and all other roads, with the exception of selected verges known as conservation verges, twice per year.

Conservation verges may contain fine examples of a particular flower or, alternatively, may feature a wide range of flowers and for these reasons they are generally left uncut to allow the plants to complete their annual growth cycle.

Over the last few years a group of volunteers from the Orkney Field Club has surveyed Orkney's roadside verges, collecting information on the species present throughout the road network. This survey work has provided a better understanding of our county's verges, their range of plants and the variety of insects, birds and mammals which they in turn support. The information gained helps the Council to monitor whether verge management is being applied correctly.

## Did you know?

Wildflowers don't need compost or fertilisers to thrive – quite the opposite. They grow best 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, dock and nettle grow so well that other wildflowers can't compete with them.

## How can farmers help?

If you are a farmer then you can help play a key role in the management of roadside verges by avoiding overspray of slurry or fertiliser from fields.