

8<sup>th</sup> January 2024

Dear Commissioner

## **MAINTENANCE OF ROADSIDE HEDGES, SOD BANKS AND VERGES**

Hedgerows, sod banks and verges are important refuges for wildlife and an integral part of the beauty of the Manx countryside. Well managed, they play a vital role in maintaining the health of the natural environment, they contribute to the good health and well-being of our population and towards our Island's carbon storage, playing a small role in mitigating for the climate emergency, and they provide numerous other Ecosystem Services such as water, soil and air regulation. They are often remnants of unimproved habitats in an agricultural landscape, containing an abundance of wildflowers and they act as corridors of cover, enabling wildlife to move from place to place. Wildflowers are enjoyed by people and they provide a nectar and food source for insects, which in turn feed native animals including birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

Every year DEFA receives inquiries from the public about appropriate roadside hedgerow, sod bank and verge management. DEFA promotes and supports the sensitive management of these important features.

Unless there is a health and safety reason to do so, we strongly recommend that hedgerows, sod banks and verges are left until September before they are cut, to avoid the bird nesting season.

What's the problem with cutting a hedge in the bird-nesting season? Cutting can result in the direct damage or destruction of nests, eggs and chicks. In addition, removing protective foliage can expose nests, leading to abandonment by the mother bird because she no longer feels safe, or to predators gaining access to the eggs and chicks.

### **Good management practices include:**

- **Not cutting hedges in the bird nesting season (1<sup>st</sup> March to the 31<sup>st</sup> August) unless there is a legitimate health and safety reason for doing so, but only after checks for nesting birds have been made and it has been ascertained that they are not present;**
- **Cutting back known problematic sections of hedge in February;**
- **Cutting flower rich verges and grass-topped sod banks annually from September onwards, once the seeds have set, to maintain the diversity of flowering plants**
- **Never cutting Japanese Knotweed, but taking measures for its responsible eradication;**
- **Hand cutting or pulling Himalayan balsam throughout the spring and early summer (avoiding native vegetation) to assist in its management and eradication.**

All wild birds, their nests, eggs and chicks are legally protected under the [Wildlife Act 1990](#). If hedgerows need to be cut for health and safety reasons during the bird nesting season, then they should be checked for nesting birds first and if a nest is found, advice must be sought from the DEFA Ecosystem Policy Team.

Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam are both invasive non-native species listed on Schedule 8 Part II of the Wildlife Act 1990. Cutting Japanese knotweed assists the plant to spread as it can regenerate from tiny fragments; enabling the plant to spread is an offence. See [www.gov.im/japanese-knotweed](http://www.gov.im/japanese-knotweed) and [www.gov.uk/guidance/prevent-japanese-knotweed-from-spreading](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/prevent-japanese-knotweed-from-spreading) for more information on eradication. To manage Himalayan balsam, it needs to be regularly hand cut or pulled throughout spring and early summer (April – June) before it sets seed. Pulled plants and cuttings should be left on-site to decompose in an open area and can then be composted.

If you would like further advice on managing these features please see the UNESCO Biosphere Isle of Man Hedge Hub - [www.biosphere.im/resources/hedge-hub](http://www.biosphere.im/resources/hedge-hub), or contact the Ecosystem Policy Team.



Hedgerow and verge providing habitat for small mammals, birds, frogs, lizards and a range of invertebrates, grasses and flowers



Harebell flower on sodbanks from late July



Red campion flowers in May, often making a colourful display with bluebells and stitchwort



Japanese knotweed growing on a road verge. It is an offence to assist this plant to spread in the wild through cutting



Himalayan balsam – cutting and pulling stands in spring and early summer before the seeds set, benefits its control and management



Japanese knotweed leaves



Road verge with legally protected orchids