

## 1.3 Field Boundary Management

**Definition:** field boundary management covers the general management of all on farm field boundaries such as hedges, stonewalls, stone banks and earth banks. Managing field boundaries is a **compulsory** aspect of all agri-environment schemes.

**Aim:** the landscape of NI is characterised by a dense patchwork of fields. Well managed field boundaries provide an invaluable habitat for wildlife, including plants, birds, mammals and insects and will enhance the value of field boundaries for landscape, shelter for livestock (animal welfare) and disease control by assisting in reducing the spread of Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis.

**Biodiversity objectives:** field boundary management contributes to the NI Biodiversity Action Plan targets for Ancient and/or Species rich hedgerows, the Irish hare and yellowhammer. Within NI species-rich hedgerows are important for a number of UK priority species identified as part of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan programme. These include red squirrel, common pipistrelle, soprana pipistrelle, linnet, reed bunting, spotted flycatcher, tree sparrow, bullfinch, song thrush and purple rampion fumitory. In addition a number of NI priority species will benefit. These include whitethroat, linnet and barn owl.

### Management requirements

- All field boundaries, including any in derelict condition, must be retained
- All external farm boundaries adjoining other farms (march ditches) must be in stock-proof condition to maximise biosecurity.
- A 1metre (m) uncultivated grass strip must be left as a buffer from farming operations from the edge of the field boundary. Organic or inorganic fertiliser, pesticides or herbicides are not permitted in this strip.
- Stone walls and stone banks must be protected from deterioration and all *in-situ* stone from walls retained.
- Maintain a variety of hedge heights, widths and shapes.
- Allow suitable hedges to grow uncut for five years or longer, trimming sides only as necessary.
- Do not cut any hedge more than once in two years. Hedges along roads may be faced annually for safety reasons.

- Existing mature trees must be retained and saplings left to grow into hedgerow trees.
- Hedges must not be cut between 1 March and 31 August.
- All sheughs must be kept open; infilling or laying drainage pipes in sheughs is not permitted.
- New or improved drainage systems must not be installed on any land, except for improved land. Existing drainage systems on unimproved grassland and permanent habitats may be repaired if necessary.

## **Further advice**

### **Hedge management**

Hedge cutting should be left as late in winter as practical so that birds can feed on berries and fruits. Maintain hedges to a minimum height of 1.5m. Dislodged stones along dry stone walls should be replaced if possible, or retained where they fall. Hedges along roads and lanes may be trimmed annually for safety reasons.

You are expected to attend a training workshop on Field Boundaries.

### **Sheugh Maintenance**

The primary function of sheughs (or ditches) is to drain land. However, they are also valuable landscape and wildlife features, important for many plants, animals, birds and insects. Sheughs should therefore be managed, not only as drainage channels, but also as valuable wildlife habitats.

Only carry out sheugh maintenance and cleaning during the autumn to late winter period. Clear away only vegetation and silt from sheughs; deepening or widening is not permitted. Leave the vegetation untouched along one side of the sheugh at cleaning. Retain a balance of trees, shrubs and fringing vegetation to maintain the natural appearance of the sheugh in the landscape. When cleaning out sheughs retain as many water loving plants as possible in the sheugh. Bulrushes, water plantain and water crowfoot control algae, provide fish spawning beds and encourage insects.

Management plans are provided for participants in the **Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Management Schemes**

