

Dry Stone Walls and Wildlife

Britain's flora and fauna owe much to the traditional dry stone walls that provide varied and valuable habitats for a whole range of wild plants and wild creatures.

How does the hunting stoat move, almost concealed, from one upland valley to the next? Where does the lowland wagtail nest, secure from predators? How can the seed of the fairy foxglove find shelter to germinate and thrive? These and countless other creatures and plants rely upon walls for their survival.



Dry stone walls are in effect, one huge linear nature reserve and they merit preservation. A little care and imagination when repairing and rebuilding will amply repay the effort, enhance these important habitats and thus help to protect the great variety of wildlife living in and around them.

Dry stone walls are the dominant field boundaries where rocky outcrops are common, the soil is thin and the climate is too harsh for hedgerows. But some lowland, more fertile regions also boast their share of walls, often with an earth bank at the bottom. In both environments they fulfil the same functions for wildlife as a hedge.

Walls are popular as field boundaries for the shelter that they provide for farm animals. They also provide varied habitats and micro-climates for wild animals. There is an exposed, wet side and a dryer, warmer side. The top is windswept but the bottom sheltered. Inside it can be dry and snug, with perhaps a trickle of water.

Fauna

Even a well-maintained dry stone wall is not without its holes, nooks and crannies affording hideaways for a myriad of humble insects and their eggs – spiders, woodlice, springtails, millipedes, bees and wasps.



The toad and slow-worm share shelter with the vole, the fieldmouse, the shrew and the hedgehog among the leaf-filled footings and fillings; and the wheatears may lay their clutches of pale blue eggs here if a gap at low level to allow entry is provided.

Higher up, a cavity the size of a house brick houses the robin or the redstart along the woodland's edge, while in the open farmland, little owls profit from deep holes inside the walls.

Where trees are scarce, an upright cope stone acts as a perch or view point, and can form an ideal plucking platform for birds of prey. Bats prefer a stone built "letter box" with a narrow slit immediately beneath the cope of higher walls.

Long, gate-free stretches can be improved for wildlife if smoots or holes are constructed to allow hares and rabbits to pass through. Building a badger gate saves much expense and many hours of work should these inveterate diggers decide to burrow their own way through and bring a gap crashing down.

Flora

Dry stone walls are wildlife gardens. Lichens, early signs of life, favour the exposed face in the pollution-free countryside. In damp and shaded areas feather and cushion mosses, algae and liverworts clothe the stones, creating tilth and compost for stonecrop, cranesbill, ivy and ferns to gain a foothold.

In lowland Britain, a wall is often the surrogate natural scree or cliff. Wall pennywort, common in some parts of the west, occasionally colonises walls in eastern Britain. The rusty back fern depends upon them for survival and walls host the polypody, spleenwort, wall rue and many others.



Flora escapees from gardens flourish and add finery to crevices and crannies up and down the country; the ivy-leaved toad flax, Oxford ragwort, Mind-Your-Own-Business and many members of the stonecrop and saxifrage (rock breaker) families.

The typical style of building combining the wall with an earth bank, common in the frost-free areas of the south-west of England and parts of Wales, opens endless possibilities for wild flowers and herbs.

Hints For Owners And Wallers

To some wildlife, semi-dereliction is more attractive than a tightly-built wall as there are more sheltered spaces and more is covered in soil. However such a state is relatively short lived. Once reduced to less than half its height, a wall's

habitat value is considerably reduced. Walls, therefore, need to be sympathetically maintained to provide varied habitats.

Adjacent trees and shrubs can push a wall over so that control of these is vital. A strip two feet wide each side should be kept free of vigorous shrubs and trees, and branches near the wall top should be lopped; a trim every few years is usually sufficient. Roots from nearby large trees can be bridged to allow peaceful co-existence.

New stone is often bare and weathering should be encouraged, perhaps by adding a little soil inside or splattering the face with manure. Walls made from existing or reclaimed stone should be rebuilt with the weathering and lichen outermost.

Surveys

Those who are interested in looking in detail at the habitats in their local dry stone walls will find much help in a set of survey papers available from the Association. These include sections on wildlife in walls as well as information for surveys of wall lengths and conditions.



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