



Hedgelands: A Wild Wander around Britain's Greatest Habitat

Christopher Hart

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Hedgelands is Christopher Hart's entertaining examination of the history, ecology, and value of an essential British landscape feature: the hedgerows that border fields throughout the countryside.

In his illuminating book, Hart argues that hedgerows are an overlooked natural resource and that revitalizing neglected hedgerows will help restore ecological diversity, nourish soil, foster natural wildlife corridors, and counter the effects of climate change. Where a tourist might see a charming remnant of Britain's pastoral past, Hart sees "a superb reservoir of wildlife." And despite development and neglect, about 400,000 kilometers of hedgerows remain.

In a fascinating historical account, Hart explains that many of Britain's hedgerows date back thousands of years. They started as "dead hedges," piles of branches and brush from when land was cleared for planting or pastures. Long rows of natural debris helped demarcate borders and contain livestock. Over time, however, these undisturbed edges also promoted a complex ecosystem. More than a thousand plant species have been found in hedgerows—or one-third of Britain's total native plant species—as well as hundreds of species of insects, birds, mammals, and fungi, including hawthorn, stag beetles, nightingales, elderberries, and (of course) hedgehogs.

Hart traveled Britain to observe this resource, noting that the healthiest remaining hedgerows are tangled, thorny, and sprawling. "You cannot replace an ancient hedge by just planting a new one," he warns naysayers. And he zooms in to observe the restoration of a hedgerow in southwest England in detail, using this to demonstrate how management techniques like pollarding and coppicing help strengthen and restore weakened hedgerows.

Extolling the native wildlife preserved in Britain's ancient hedgerows, *Hedgelands* issues a persuasive plea to rewild these habitats.

KRISTEN RABE (May / June 2024)

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