

## Wild About Rainham Wildlife Survey

### Feedback following ceasing regular mowing of grass verges in Rainham.

Thank you so much for supporting the value of grass verges for wildlife, following our conversations over the last year. I wanted to update and thank you, as the benefits are already starting to show, following no mowing of the green spaces and verges by Medway Council in 2020.

Please see below a summary of information and feedback from a local wildlife and flora survey which I hope you will find of interest and hopefully convince Medway Council to build on this good work for the benefit of the environment in Rainham.

### Summary of UK wide flora and wildlife as of 2019

Over 700 species and nearly 45% of our total flora, are found on our road verges and considering we've lost 97% of our wild flower meadows since the 1930s, these crucial habitats need to be properly managed. This year there has been a noted increase by conservation charities seeing an increase in awareness of the importance and potential of road verge habitats by local Councils. The UK wide support from councils to make important changes to the way verges are managed, is crucial for saving wild flowers and the wealth of wildlife they support.

### Medway Council 2020

By allowing the verges to grow naturally this year (either due to Corona lockdown or by choice), Medway Council are helping already to make a positive difference to wildlife in Rainham (and Medway).

### Rainham Wildlife and Flora Survey April 2020

A community wildlife consultation was undertaken in Rainham in April 2020, during week 6 of lockdown and following no mowing of grass verges from the council. It assessed the 'feel' of the community relating to the road verges and what benefits have been seen in a relatively short period of time (6 weeks).

2460 people were asked and 214 results were reported on the following question.

**'What wildlife have you seen during lockdown, which you have not seen in the previous 3 years.'**

The following animals were included in the survey, being careful to not be too specific and put off participation for people who feel they are unable to identify the species in detail.

**Foxes:** Stable population in the UK

**Bird of Pray:** Amber conservation concern in general, but does depend on species. (We didn't ask for species ID in this survey as felt may be a limiting factor to joining the survey if needed to ID) (RSPB)

**A type of insects:** 75% strongly **declining** globally in both abundance and diversity

**Type of wild bird:** **British birds** have been in gradual **decline** for the last few decades, but the loss of species has dropped dramatically in recent years, with some species falling by up to 95% (RSPB)

**Hedgehogs:** **Hedgehog** numbers have fallen by about 50% since the turn of the century

**Amphibian:** Common frog, common toad and natterjack toad populations have been reported as being in **decline** since the 1970s (Frog life)

**Other mammal:** 41% of species studied have experienced **decline** since 1970 (BBC)

**Reptile:** The first nationwide survey of **UK** amphibian and **reptiles** has found that **Britain's** most widespread snake, the adder, is in **decline**. Slow worms, common **lizards** and grass **snakes** are also becoming less widespread, as are the common toad, common frog and the great crested newt. (ARC Trust)

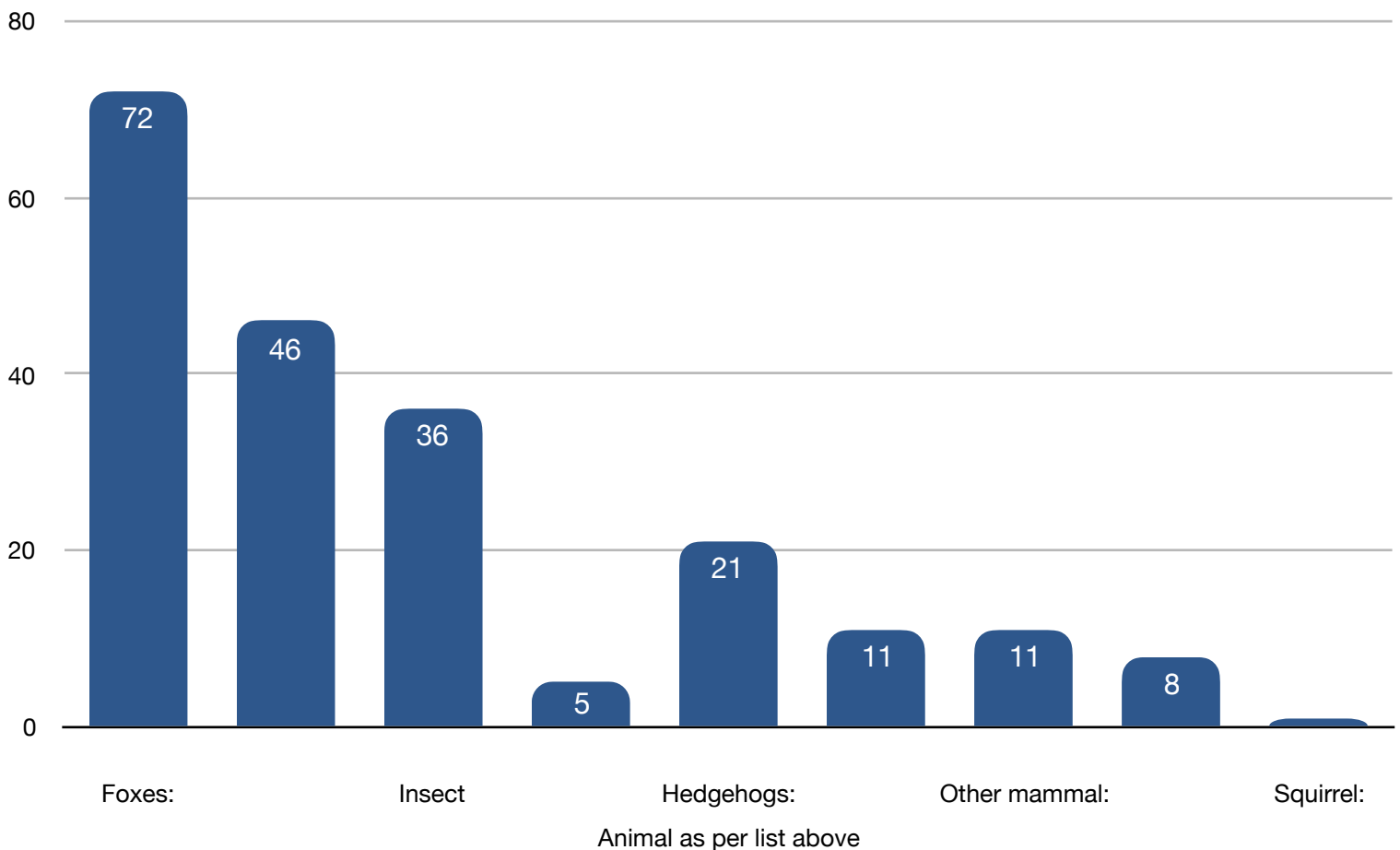
2 facebook groups were asked over 4 days with 2460 people in total

**Rainham Community Group (2200 at the time):**

- Foxes: 64
- Bird of Prey: 38
- A type of insects: 36
- A type of wild bird:
- Hedgehogs: 14
- Amphibian: 11
- Other mammal: 7
- Reptile: 5
- Squirrel: 1

**Wild about Rainham Group (260 at the time):**

- Foxes: 8
- Bird of Prey: 8
- A type of insects: 3
- A type of wild bird: 5
- Hedgehogs: 7
- Amphibian:
- Other mammal: 4
- Reptile: 3



**Wild flora:** Was surveyed after 6 weeks of lockdown by a local botanist Annie Watkins and only covered the fauna seen during the week of 30th April, which is a small window. It studied 4 of the many mini meadows in Rainham (it is understood there are over 200 green spaces like this in the

town). It is likely the fauna is much more diverse if capacity allowed a far greater survey to be done.

## Forna Review

Identification of the fauna within 4 of the mini meadows identified in Rainham allow the following plants to be identified since they have been allowed to grow and not be mowed. (This was on one day in April, so is a small example on a very specific time in the flora calendar)

🌻 Common thistle or Nodding thistle. Wait for it to bloom.

🌺 Meadow cranesbill

🌻 Spurge

🌺 Dandelion

🌻 White nettle.

🌺 Cloverleaf

🌻 Various grasses.

🌺 Cow parsley, poss

🌻 Hemlock Water-dropwort

🌺 Burdock

🌻 Stinging nettles

🌺 Wild clematis



Continuing with late and less cutting after lockdown is vital in order to grow on this success and is a great news story for Rainham and Medway more widely if this is to continue across the whole authority. It is felt anecdotally, that whilst from an access point of view, there will be a need to keep some green space mowed and clear of flowers, but more broadly a more nature centric point of view has huge value for nature, Medway's PR, money saving education and wellbeing of residents.

## Further Questioning regarding mowing of verges

### Community Questionnaire

Statement in response to question; 'How do people feel about the grass verges not being cut by Medway Council in April 2020?'	Votes	Percentages (figures may not be entirely accurate due to rounding)
Loving the mini meadows and increased wildlife!	156	71.8%
Looks awful, bring back the mower!	37	17.1%
No opinion one way or the other	19	8.8%
Generally in favour, some areas need cutting	3	1.3%
Leave some, but mainly cut the green areas and verges	2	1%

Comments are available to view in the Rainham (Kent) Community Facebook page. Broadly the comments were very positive. The negative comments tended to link un-mown grass verges to a potential increase in dog mess and litter in the verges. From consultation with Plantlife colleagues, this hasn't been identified as a reality for councils who have chosen not to mow the verges, but which could be overcome as part of some suggestions below (such additional signage and reallocation of resource from money saved)

#### Potential questions: (Source - Plantlife International)

##### Will road safety be compromised by managing verges for wildlife?

No. Safety comes first but with the size of most verges there should be no conflict with conservation. For many verges, a regular late summer cut and removal of clippings will keep the verge open, safe and thriving with interesting wildlife. Certain verges must be cut regularly to maintain clear lines of visibility – this is particularly crucial at junctions where a 'visibility splay' has to be maintained at all times. On some busy roads, this also applies to the first metre from the edge of the carriageway.

##### Will it cost more money to adopt these guidelines?

Our basic advice is to cut less (only once or twice per year) and to change the timing of cutting from spring to late summer or autumn. If you're currently cutting verges three or more times a year, you could actually save money by reducing the number of cuts. For example, Dorset adopted a new strategy for managing its highway verges in 2014. Since then, the council estimates it has saved £100,000 through, among other things, fewer cuts of road verges. Further details on costs for better verge management projects can be found in the case studies of our website.

##### Is collecting grass cuttings essential for better management?



Reducing the number of cuts and changing the timing of the cut are a great place to start. However, collecting grass cuttings makes a significant difference. It reduces the thick thatch that can build up on verges and prevents wild flower seeds germinating, and it reduces nutrient levels, which encourage vigorous, competitive species. Over time, removing the cuttings makes the verge easier to manage as reduced nutrient levels means that slower-growing wild flower species start to replace lush grass growth.

This can present a challenge to some councils due to budget, time, or equipment constraints. It is therefore something to work towards implementing in the future; there are exciting developments in 'cut-and-collect' machinery being trialled by various councils and highways agencies. We're even seeing the appearance of mini-balers on some larger verges. It's worth considering that cut-and-collect might be an option on a smaller scale if there is an active community or volunteer programme. Clippings can be raked by hand and composted nearby. Several volunteer verge groups have had success managing their verges this way – please see our case studies.

### Suggestions and Anecdotal Comments:

Using funding which is available and I am happy to apply for, signs can be used to build positive PR, raise awareness of why verges are not being cut and provide education about the benefit. People still like to think a 'neat' grass verge is a good thing and will take some time to develop a new way of thinking for some, but there is a will and funding

to allow the council to do this and announce a good news story starting from lockdown.

I can put you in touch with former colleagues from Plantlife who can support you with making sure this is as money saving and beneficial as possible. Many councils before you have seen huge benefits beyond the 6 weeks I have concluded on here and come the summer, the list of

will vast.

saved fauna be

