



MELISSA HARRISON | NOTEBOOK

Our verdant verges hold beauty and beasts alike

[Melissa Harrison](#)

Friday April 19 2024, 9.00pm, The Times

What a magical thing a strip of unregarded roadside verge can be in spring. Here in Suffolk our village lanes are newly edged in wildflowers: choirs of garlic mustard offering up the frail torches of their tiny blooms, drooping star-of-bethlehem conferring in huddles, buttery celandines and lilac cuckooflowers dressing the damper spots, dense constellations of greater stitchwort where the sun hits, herb robert, red deadnettle, cowslips and shy English bluebells, their cobalt flowers glowing mysteriously from amid the sheltering grass.

As the daffodil stems die back, the cow parsley comes pushing up, though here it's not yet in its pomp; above the verges the blackthorn hedges have largely finished flowering and are handing the baton to the May blossom, with its evocative, unsettling smell.

Travel on foot or by bike, instead of by car, and more richness reveals itself. Dunnocks and robins flit from place to place

goosegrass is beginning its yearly bid to clothe the hedge in sticky-burred scaffolding comes a busy rustle and a high-pitched series of wheezy squeaks.

- [Tragedy for otter turns into detective thriller](#)

Shrews are vocal creatures and thought to use some of their highest-frequency sounds for echolocation, helping them find their way around and detect their insect prey. In fact, the squeaks are so high-pitched as to sound almost like a grasshopper, except less rhythmical and too early in the year.

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There are nearly 300,000 miles of road verge in Britain, from village lanes to the banks of motorways: in total, an area of land about the size of Nottinghamshire. Nearly half the UK's native wildflowers make verges their home, including 29 species of orchid, not to mention the hundreds of species of pollinators that rely on them, the other invertebrates crucial to support life further up the food chain, and dozens more mammals, reptiles, amphibians and birds.

Helped (or simply allowed) to prosper, verges can be a vital habitat for wildlife, boosting the ecological richness of the entire area as well as being beautiful to look at. A well vegetated verge can also improve air pollution downwind of traffic, absorb

rainwater and prevent soil erosion, improving driving conditions

[Flemstone Woodhouse takes death to stay alive](#)

Too often, though, they are strimmed or sprayed into submission by homeowners, land managers, local councils or Highways England, or they are badly managed, for instance by allowing fast-growing, “bully” species such as alexanders to dominate, as they have been allowed to in coastal Norfolk, where they shade out all other species to miserable, monotonous effect.

Mutant hero daisies

A sharp-eyed young neighbour brought a small treasure to my door: a strange-looking daisy she had found growing in the village play area, which, with its wide, flat stem and broad, misshaped flowerhead looked as though a dozen flowers had somehow become fused.



The form of mutation called fasciation produces flowers such as this two-headed daisy

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I had never seen anything like it, but soon learnt that this form of mutation is called fasciation, and moreover that it is relatively common: friends and acquaintances quickly came forward to show me their pictures of fasciated bluebells, dandelions and even willow twigs, and within a week or so I had found my own two-headed dandelion growing on the watermeadows; now I have my eye in, I'm hoping to find more.

Fasciation can be triggered by many things, from a random genetic mutation to viruses, fungi, bacteria, mites, chemicals, zinc deficiency and even mechanical damage from mowing or frost; usually the cause is unknown and it can simply be considered a "plant mistake".

In garden and house plants, these mistakes are easily pruned out, though some fasciated plants have been deliberately propagated to preserve the strangeness, either from cuttings, or, if the mutation is genetic, by seed. These usually take the variant or forma name "cristata".

Silly squirrels

It can be surprising to remind ourselves that nature makes mistakes and that, like us, animals sometimes do silly things. I don't mean birds that fly into panes of glass or try to land on motorways; that's not their fault, it's ours.

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But I've seen a squirrel misjudge a distance, leap for a branch and simply not make it, falling instead, with a thud, to the ground; and recently I found a pheasant that had tried to land in a bramble thicket, become tangled in the thorny stolons and, unable to free itself, had died.

This week friends of mine found a dead stoat with puncture wounds to the back of its neck, most likely from a bird of prey (stoats are fierce and will turn to fight any pursuer they know about, such as a cat).

Extremely strong and flexible, the stoat probably squirmed around to bite the raptor, which released it uneaten; but the damage was done and it died of its wounds. I wonder whether the bird lived to regret its mistake.

Find out more about **Encounter**, a free nature app Melissa is developing, at encounter-nature.com

Gardening

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Gabriel Winn



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Thomas Williams



20 APRIL, 2024

I've thought for a long time that all road side verges should be declared national parks starting with motorway verges.

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Tom Norris



20 APRIL, 2024

In 2018 I emailed National Highways. I was furious because much of the banking at the side of the M1 north of Leeds had been mowed very early, cutting down the millions of cowslips that were still in bloom. The cowslips have spread very successfully as their seed is carried along by the slipstream ...

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An excellent idea!

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Patrick Winter



20 APRIL, 2024

Beautiful article - so lovely to see spring emerging after all the rain

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Alison Dow



20 APRIL, 2024

A delightful article! I love the roadside wildflowers, although here it mostly runs to alkernet. The farm track (known as the lane) that runs beside my house and through the fields is bordered by masses of stitchwort and cow parsley (or Queen Anne's Lace if you prefer). Further on is a huge hedge o...

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Margaret Padfield



20 APRIL, 2024

We have a closed grave yard the care of which has been handed over to the council . It is quite literally a medieval walled area full of wonderful flowers. The primroses are going over replaced by English bluebells and hundreds of cowslips .Orchids to follow and scabias which hosts a rare mining be...

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Bob Pendleton



20 APRIL, 2024

Thanks Melissa, the country needs people like you to highlight the importance of nature.

Always well researched and a delight to read. Thank you!

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S **s chappell** ...
20 APRIL, 2024

You're lucky to have verges, most of the ones around me have been devastated by SUVs.

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J **J F Sell** ...
19 APRIL, 2024

Looking at the picture of the shrew I mistakenly expected something about Hedgehogs - and discover if they are emerging from hibernation yet?
I'm in the north of England.

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S **S Seal** ...
20 APRIL, 2024

I was disappointed to see the grass beside the A49 being cut. I could understand if it was for safety on a blind bend or junction but this was a long, straight stretch.

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P **P Loughlan** ...
20 APRIL, 2024

I too have seen a squirrel take a tumble and have thought that it seemed sheepish. (Normally I wouldn't dream of mentioning the latter thought but the article in today's paper about animal consciousness has emboldened me.)

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P **Pat Balsdon** ...
20 APRIL, 2024

One dropped from an enormous height at our feet, leaving an indentation. It got up, shook itself and ambled off, apparently unhurt.

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P Phillips

20 APRIL, 2024

I must visit Suffolk. Elsewhere in the country the untended verges are strewn with litter. The wildlife card is played as an excuse for failing to pay for proper maintenance.

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