

# Living life on the hedge



**ABOVE:** Bowland Volunteer group hedgelaying workshop in Calder Vale. Geoff Watley, John Watson, Tarja Wilson, Brian Jones and Bob Chaplin help with conservation.

**LEFT:** Bob Chaplin gets to grips with a hedge.

**A** GROUP of countrylovers refuse to hedge their bets when it comes to restoring, renewing and laying new hedges in Bowland and district.

Their painstaking work has seen hundreds of yards of hedges planted and pitched.

The volunteer group, run by the county council's Countryside Service, regularly visits land in public and private ownership to help with hedgelaying.

Geoff Whitley of Scorton, countryside craftsman and hedgelaying expert is a regular tutor with the volunteers, who are often joined by members of the public interested in learning the ancient outdoor skill.

Geoff, who is well known in the area for his wood carvings, explained that hedges must be laid in the winter months, when the plants in the hedgerow are dormant.

He also explained that they must be laid 'uphill', as stems laid parallel to the ground or pointing groundwards will die - as their sap will not travel upwards.

Each stem to be laid is cut through to about 2/3rds of its width, close to the ground. Then an axe is used to cut away and thin the stem above the cut to the point at which the stem can be bent over without breaking.

One of the most difficult and time-consuming parts of hedgelaying is untangling one

**By ANTHONY COPPIN**

plant from the next one in the hedge. This must be done as each stem has to be cut and laid individually.

Stakes are used to contain and protect the hedge while it is growing. If there is insufficient material to make a stock-proof hedge then new plants are planted in the gaps.

These must be protected for several years until the stems are big enough to be laid themselves. Eventually when all the new material is laid, the hedge will only need trimming from time to time before being laid again, maybe in about 40 years time.

One of the most recent hedgelaying sessions was at Higher Landskill, near Oakenclough.

The hedges in the Higher Landskill area had, over time, become overgrown, "gappy" and not stock proof.

But it's not just the hedges alone the group's talented members are helping.

They never think of the hedges as simply boundaries or markers - the hedges are created with a view to their potential to help wildlife as well.

Tarja Wilson, the county council countryside officer for North and West Bowland says the open rushy pastures of Higher Landskill Farm are ideal habitat for waders, including snipe, curlews and lapwings to breed successfully.

"The chicks have plenty of food to forage for in the damp/moody areas plus the farmer is planning to re-profile some of the ditches.

"Producers such as crows and magpies like to perch in trees that overlook the pasture so the combination of hedgelaying and removal of the beech trees give the eggs and chicks a better chance of survival."

Hedges and dry stone walls are 'traditional field boundaries' in this part of the country and they are being encouraged by the Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and by the stewardship payments to farmers on selected farms.

The Forest of Bowland AONB believes in education and training in relevant countryside skills and this hedgelaying training enables local people to appreciate and experience this old skill and to make a difference to their own environment.

Spokesman Mr Martin Charlesworth said: "More hedges are being planted than at any time in the recent past and there is an increasing demand for skilled hedgelayers."

● For further information about the work of the hedgelayers and other activities in which you can get involved in Bowland, ring Mr Charlesworth on 07989258675.