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Conservation of Farmland Birds

Over the last 40 years or so, there has been a steep decline in farmland bird populations. This is believed to have been caused mainly by the loss of nesting habitats, insect rich foraging habitats and a decrease in seed supplies during the winter, early spring and summer. Thankfully, a range of measures supported by the Entry Level Agri-environment Funding Scheme (ELS) and Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) can help provide these requirements. The schemes contain a wide range of new and existing seed mixtures to promote the abundance and diversity of birds, bumblebees, butterflies, other invertebrates and rare plant life found on arable farmland. New prescriptions include establishing mixtures of seed-bearing crops to provide winter food for birds.

Birds that have declined particularly steeply on farmland, are the seed eating birds associated with arable farming that require abundant seeds for food throughout the winter and early spring. Many of these same birds also require plentiful insect life as a food source during the spring and summer on which to feed their chicks. Insect life, of course, having the added benefit to the farmer of including pollinators which help increase cash crop yield by setting more seed.

Arable and mixed farms are very capable of supporting populations of seed eating birds, by creating key habitats for them such as those that will be rich in seeds and/or insects throughout the year. Doing so will encourage various species including Grey Partridge, Lapwing, Turtle Dove, Skylark, Yellow Wagtail, Tree Sparrow, Linnet and Corn Bunting.



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Other species of birds, such as Starlings (which decreased by 68% between 1970-2007) feed on soil invertebrates all year round and lowland farms with grassland - in particular that which is grazed by cattle – often have sizeable populations of these birds. Farms with wet grassland and marshy ground can hold populations of breeding waders, such as Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank and Snipe which require sensitive grassland management and the creation or maintenance of shallow wet features to provide nesting and feeding habitats.

Grassland

Birds can differ greatly in grassland requirements depending on their species. Grazed pasture is favoured by birds that require short swards for nesting or feeding, such as Skylarks, while others prefer tall cover and will utilise meadows. The timing of mowing is particularly critical, as cutting for hay or silage too early threatens the nests and chicks of ground-nesting birds. Cutting at the wrong time may also reduce food supplies by preventing wildflowers from flowering and attracting feed insects and pollinators and also the grasses from setting seed. Species rich hay meadows are rich in wildlife and their long term management should be maintained as a matter of importance.



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Wetland

Well managed wet grasslands can provide over wintering and breeding habitat for wading birds and wildfowl. Wading birds such as Snipe, Redshank and Lapwing favour damp soil conditions with areas of shallow standing water in spring and early summer to provide invertebrate food for their chicks. Creating 'scrapes' (shallow depressions with gently sloping edges) which seasonally hold a little water can provide the habitat these birds need to thrive. Grassland management is also a key factor here, as Lapwing prefer a short, varied sward while Redshank prefer a more tussock sward which is best achieved by cattle grazing. Hedgerow management including pollarding is also very important for these birds, as waders like open habitat lacking in perches for potential predators. Traditional methods of meadow management should be encouraged.

Cropped Areas

A number of options are available for cropped areas of the farm. These include over-wintered stubbles, wild bird seed mixtures and conservation headlands.



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Over-wintered stubble

Leaving stubbles over winter provides spilt grain (modern farming methods leave little residue) and weed seeds as an important source of feed for birds over the winter months. Birds that will benefit include Grey Partridge, Linnet and Tree Sparrow. Arable weeds that pop up amongst the stubble such as Chickweed and Fat Hen are most beneficial. If possible, aim for a variety of stubble heights around the farm. Tall stubble is favoured by game birds and Skylarks for protection from predators, whilst shorter stubble is preferred by Sparrows, Finches and Buntings for better visibility when feeding.

Wild bird seed mixtures

An unharvested crop of seed-bearing species which provides a vital food source for seed eating birds throughout the winter months. They are particularly important in areas where traditional food sources, such as weedy stubbles, are no longer available. An annual cereal-based mix will provide the most reliable food source for species such as Yellowhammers and Corn Buntings, while game birds will make more use of kale-based biennial mixtures. A mix including a cereal and an oil-rich crop (e.g. kale, linseed or quinoa) will benefit the widest range of species.



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Conservation headlands

Conservation headlands are headlands of cereal crops that are not fertilised, and only sprayed with selective herbicides for grass weeds. The small populations of broad-leaved plants, together with their insect communities, provide increased food for birds that feed in the crop edge, such as Grey Partridge. Conservation headlands are best suited to light soils which are not infested with competitive weeds, and are best situated next to tussock margins or grass and wildflower margins which in turn attract plentiful insect life.

Hedgerows are an important part of farmland bird conservation as they are an essential habitat for various species, providing food (including berries and other fruits), shelter and nesting sites. Recent surveys have suggested that the single most important feature of the hedgerow for birds is its height. Bird numbers, species diversity and nest density all increase with higher hedgerows, up to a height of 3m. Bird diversity drops sharply when hedges fall below 2m. This suggests that 2-3m is a critical height for hedgerows, below which their value to birds may be diminished, but above which there is little further benefit to birds. Hedge trimming may not necessarily be detrimental, as long as it does not lower the hedge below this threshold. Mature trees within hedgerows are beneficial, providing shelter, nest sites, singing posts and food. Patchy hedgerows are a poor habitat for birds, emphasising the need for regular hedgerow maintenance.



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CSS compliant seed mixtures are available to help support the welfare of farmland birds both directly and indirectly.

Mixtures directly benefitting birds by providing seed for feed include:-

- AB9 (ELS5) Winter bird food
- AB12 Supplementary winter feed
- GS3 Ryegrass seed set as a winter feed
- OP2 Wild bird seed mixture
- OP3 Supplementary feed for warmer months

Mixtures indirectly benefitting birds by providing habitat for feed insects include:-

- AB1 (CSS6, CSS7) Nectar flower mixtures – also attracts pollinators beneficial to setting cash crop seed to increase yield
- AB8 (ELS3, CSS3) Flower rich margins and plots

Mixtures that provide habitat/cover for the birds themselves and also draw in and hold the insects for food include:-

- AB3 (CSS1, CSS2) Buffer strips, field corners and beetle banks
- AB15 Legume fallow
- AB16 Pollen & nectar flower mixtures

