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FARMING FOR BIRDS

# Grey partridge



Distribution map showing the relative abundance of grey partridges in Britain and Ireland 1988-91



Grey partridge by Roger Wilmshurst (rspb-images.com)

The grey partridge has a brick-red face, as opposed to the black-and-white face pattern on the red-legged partridge

The grey partridge can be found in most farming systems, except predominantly improved grasslands. The UK grey partridge population fell by 87% between 1970 and 2003. This has been caused mainly by the loss of insect food sources on farmland. The loss of seed sources, loss of nesting habitat and predation have also contributed.

## WHAT DO GREY PARTRIDGES NEED?

**Nesting habitat:** grey partridges nest on the ground in hedge bottoms, grass margins, beetle banks, cereals, game cover and nettle beds. Dead tussocky grass left over from the previous year is particularly attractive as nesting cover.

**Summer food:** grey partridge chicks feed on insects, especially caterpillars, beetles, bugs, ants and aphids. Breeding is more successful when there is plenty of this food available. Chicks take insects mainly from within the crop, especially the headlands.

**Winter food and cover:** adult grey partridges feed mainly on seeds and shoots throughout the year. Places where they can find such food include weedy winter stubbles, rotational set-aside and wild bird cover crops. They also require cover to conceal them from predators, especially in early spring.

## ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A GREY PARTRIDGE

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Coveys break up and territorial pairs need winter cover with plenty of seed food.			Main breeding season. They most often nest in rough grass margins of arable crops. Chicks feed on insects, largely within the crop headland.			Coveys seek cover with plenty of seed food, such as wild bird seed mixtures or tall weedy stubbles.					

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE GREY PARTRIDGES?

Nesting habitat	Summer food	Winter food
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid planting trees and do not increase the height of hedgerows above 2 metres in areas used by nesting partridges.</li> <li><b>SA ELS</b> Create tussocky grass buffer strips and field corners around arable fields, especially fields with open boundaries, ditches or short hedges. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year.</li> <li><b>SA</b> Cut non-rotational set-aside on or just before 15 August and leave 25% uncut each year to reduce the risk of nest loss.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> Create beetle banks through the middle of arable fields larger than 16 hectares.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> In pastoral areas where grey partridges are still present, leave 6 m buffer strips of silage fields uncut and maintain or increase areas of arable cropping.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create brood-rearing habitat with plenty of insect food adjacent to good nesting habitat.</li> <li><b>SA ELS HLS</b> An annual mixture of cereal and at least two other crops can be established (minimum 6 metres wide) as a brood-rearing cover using the wild bird seed mixture options.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> Undersown spring cereals can boost insect numbers on mixed farms.</li> <li>Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> Adopt conservation headlands (especially the option with no fertiliser as these offer easy access for chicks) <b>HLS</b> or low-input cereal crops to boost beneficial broad-leaved weeds and associated insects.</li> <li><b>ELS HLS</b> Maintain areas of unimproved grassland or manage grassland with low-inputs to boost insect food.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep some tall cover (&gt;20 cm) at all times, especially in February and March, close to or as part of suitable feeding areas, to reduce predation.</li> <li><b>ELS HLS</b> Create areas of wild bird seed mixture in the spring with a high proportion of cereal in the mix. Kale left for a second year is good. Renew half the crops each year, to provide some cover in early spring every year.</li> <li><b>SA ELS</b> Leave fields of over-wintered stubbles and rotational set-aside unmanaged for as long as possible through the winter and early spring.</li> <li><b>HLS</b> Low-input cereal crops followed by over-wintered stubble provide more seed food for birds than conventional stubbles.</li> <li><b>ELS HLS</b> In pastoral areas where grey partridges are still present, maintain or increase areas of arable cropping.</li> </ul>

### KEY

= all farms
  = arable and mixed farms
  = pastoral farms
  **ELS** = Entry Level Stewardship
  **HLS** = Higher Level Stewardship
  **SA** = Set-aside

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB,  
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,  
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL  
Tel: 01767 680551  
[www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)



Farming and Wildlife Advisory  
Group, NAC, Stoneleigh,  
Kenilworth, Warwickshire  
CV8 2RX Tel: 024 7669 6699  
[www.fwag.org.uk](http://www.fwag.org.uk)



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge,  
Hampshire SP6 1EF Tel: 01425 652381  
[www.gct.org.uk](http://www.gct.org.uk)

## PRIORITY ACTION

- The grey partridge is a target species for Higher Level Stewardship.
- Ensure that the farm provides nesting habitat, summer food and winter food.
- Create brood-rearing habitat with plenty of insect food adjacent to good nesting areas.
- Provide seed food through the winter with wild bird seed mixtures, over-wintered stubble or rotational set-aside.
- Get involved by joining The Game Conservancy Trust's Partridge Count Scheme, and get the latest partridge management and conservation information ([www.gct.org.uk/partridge](http://www.gct.org.uk/partridge)).

### See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

- arable crops on livestock farms
- beetle banks
- buffer strips on cultivated land
- buffer strips on grassland
- conservation headlands
- grazed pasture
- hay and silage meadows
- hedgerow management
- low-input cereals
- over-wintered stubble
- set-aside management
- wild bird seed mixtures.

### The Game Conservancy Trust also has factsheets on specific aspects of grey partridge conservation ([www.gct.org.uk/partridge](http://www.gct.org.uk/partridge)):

- Restoring grey partridges to your farm
- Providing nesting cover for wild grey partridges
- Providing brood-rearing cover for wild grey partridges
- Providing winter cover and food for wild grey partridges
- Using predator control to increase wild grey partridge numbers
- England: The 'best' ELS/HLS options for grey partridge conservation

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://www.farmwildlife.info)