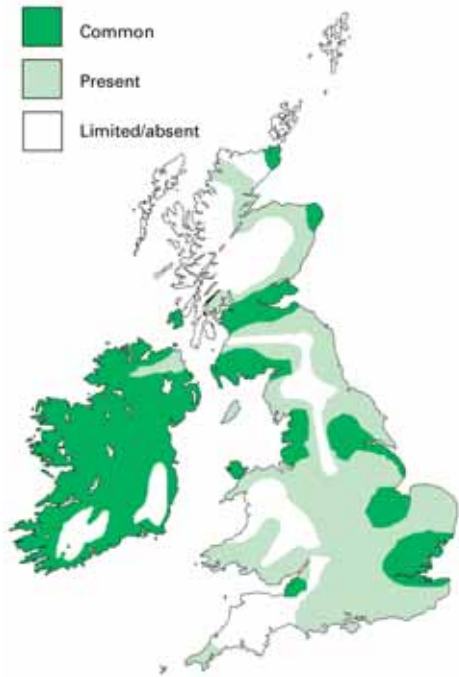




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FARMING FOR BIRDS

Reed bunting



Distribution map showing the relative abundance of reed buntings in Britain and Ireland 1988–91



Reed bunting by Steve Kneill (rspb-images.com)

The male reed bunting has a distinctive black-and-white head pattern. The female has a brown head with bold cream stripes over the eye and down the throat

The reed bunting is found in a wide range of farmland types, but is rare in upland areas. The UK population of reed buntings fell by 43% between 1970 and 2003. This decline has probably been caused by the reduction of damp habitats and food sources on farmland.

WHAT DO REED BUNTINGS NEED?

Nesting habitat: reed buntings nest in thick vegetation, including crops (especially oilseed rape), ditch banks and set-aside. Nests can be protected by delaying the cut of set-aside until mid-August, leaving buffer strips and ditch banks uncut, and not swathing oilseed rape crops.

Summer food: insects and spiders are important food items in the summer, especially for the chicks before they fledge. They take a variety of insects from crops, grasslands and the banks of watercourses.

Winter food: adults predominantly eat seeds. They find seed in winter stubbles, on weeds in the crop margin and grasslands that are not grazed or cut, such as arable field margins. They can also find food in wet areas, such as boggy field corners and grassy fringes of ponds and wet ditches.

ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A REED BUNTING

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
They roost in hedges, feeding on seeds, especially grasses and brassicas.			Main breeding season. They nest in thick crops and rough grassland, feeding on seeds and insects.			They roost in hedges, feeding on seeds, especially grasses and brassicas.					
			1st broods			2nd broods					

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE REED BUNTINGS?

Nesting habitat	Summer food	Winter food
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELS Leave banks of ditches and watercourses uncut until September, and cut on at least a three-year rotation, so that no more than one-third of banks are cut each year. • SA Cut non-rotational set-aside on or just before 15 August and leave 25% uncut each year to reduce the risk of nest loss. • SA Delay spraying rotational set-aside until target weeds start seeding, to maximise control and provide nesting habitat and food for reed buntings for as long as possible. • Where possible, do not swath oilseed rape crops, as this will destroy a high proportion of reed bunting nests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SA ELS Create wide uncut buffer strips and field corners around arable and grass fields, especially fields next to ditches or watercourses. • ELS Maintain wet features such as ponds and wet ditches, but allow rank and emergent vegetation to develop. • ELS Pollen and nectar mixtures can be used to boost insect abundance. • Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March. • ELS Adopt conservation headlands HLS or low-input cereal crops to boost broadleaved weeds and the associated insects. • ELS HLS Maintain areas of unimproved grassland (especially wet grassland) or manage grassland with low-inputs to boost insect food. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELS HLS Create areas of wild bird seed mixture in the spring, including quinoa or brassicas such as kale in the mix (mixtures with kale should be kept for two years to allow the kale to produce seed). • SA ELS Leave fields of over-wintered stubbles and rotational set-aside unmanaged for as long as possible through the winter. • HLS Low-input cereal crops followed by over-wintered stubble provide more seed food for birds than conventional stubbles. • ELS HLS Maintain or increase areas of arable cropping in pastoral areas. • ELS Allow some grassland to set seed in buffer strips or field corners and leave it uncut through the winter.

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



Farming and Wildlife Advisory
Group, NAC, Stoneleigh,
Kenilworth, Warwickshire
CV8 2RX Tel: 024 7669 6699
www.fwag.org.uk



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge,
Hampshire SP6 1EF Tel: 01425 652381
www.gct.org.uk

PRIORITY ACTION

- Ensure that the farm provides nesting habitat, summer food and winter food.
- Boost insect food by maintaining wet habitats, using low-input options or creating buffer strips.
- Provide seed food through the winter with wild bird seed mixtures, over-wintered stubble, rotational set-aside or allowing some grass to set seed.

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

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

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info