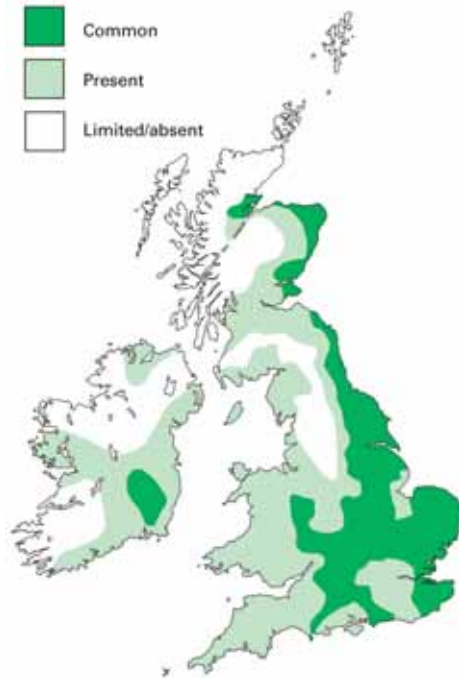




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FARMING FOR BIRDS

# Yellowhammer



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



Yellowhammer by Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The male yellowhammer has a distinctive song, said to sound like 'a little bit of bread and no cheese'.

The yellowhammer is widely distributed on all farmland types. Densities are higher in lowland areas, especially where there is at least some arable farming. The UK yellowhammer population fell by 54% between 1970 and 2003, probably because fewer seed food sources are available to them on farmland.

## WHAT DO YELLOWHAMMERS NEED?

**Nesting habitat:** Yellowhammers nest on, or close to, the ground in ditch vegetation or at the base of short, thick hedgerows and scrub. They are most common in hedgerows that have a wide, uncut grass margin or ditch. They often breed until the end of August, so cutting hedges or margins before the end of August can destroy nests.

**Summer food:** Yellowhammer chicks depend largely on insects for food. Adults also feed on insects in the breeding season. Wide grass margins around arable fields provide many insects as well as nesting habitat.

**Winter food:** Adults feed mainly on seeds throughout the year, especially cereal grain. They seek places where they can find lots of seed food, such as winter stubbles, wild bird seed mixtures, rotational set-aside or areas where cereals are fed to cattle. Yellowhammers rarely use improved pastures or grass leys, as these do not provide any seed food.


## ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A YELLOWHAMMER


| January   | February | March | April | May   | June | July       | August | September   | October | November | December |
|---|----------|-------|-------|---|------|------------|--------|---|---------|----------|----------|
| Flocks may move to find new sources of seed food, especially cereal grains, in winter and early spring. |          |       |       | Main breeding season. They nest in hedges and scrub, or rough grass at the base of hedges and banks of ditches. They feed on seeds, but feed chicks on insects. |      |            |        | They flock together in winter to find sites with plenty of seed food. |         |          |          |
|   |          |       |       | 1st broods  |      | 2nd broods |        |   |         |          |          |

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE YELLOWHAMMERS?

| Nesting habitat   | Summer food   | Winter food   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>ELS</b> Maintain short, thick hedgerows by trimming on a two or three year rotation outside of the nesting season.</li> <li>Maintain short bushes and areas of scrub, especially along ditch banks.</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>SA ELS</b> Create wide grass buffer strips and field corners around arable fields and leave hedge-side margin uncut to form tussocks, but cut crop-side margin annually outside of the nesting season.</li> <li>Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March.</li> <li><b>ELS HLS</b> Adopt conservation headlands or low-input cereal crops to boost broadleaved weeds and the associated insects.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>ELS HLS</b> Create areas of wild bird seed mixture in the spring with a high proportion of cereal in the mix.</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 the most seed food for birds.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>SA ELS</b> Create wide grass buffer strips and field corners around arable fields, especially fields with thick hedges and/or ditches.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> In pastoral areas, leave some six-metre buffer strips of silage fields uncut.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delay spraying rotational set-aside until target weeds start seeding to maximise control and provide food for yellowhammers for as long as possible.</li> <li><b>ELS</b> In pastoral areas, leave some six-metre buffer strips of silage fields uncut.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>ELS</b> Maintain or increase areas of arable cropping and leave over-wintered stubbles if possible, or create plots of wild bird seed mixtures.</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 yellowhammer is a target species for Higher Level Stewardship in some western counties dominated by pastoral farming.
- Maintain short, thick hedges and ditches with wide grass margins for nesting.
- Ensure that there is at least one good seed food source throughout the winter.

### 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
- Hedgerow management
- Low-input cereals
- Over-wintered stubble
- Set-aside management
- Wild bird seed mixtures

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