



Arable crops on livestock farms



The changing mosaic of habitats associated with mixed farming, especially if it is extensively managed, offers birds a good range of food, nest sites and cover.

One of the major agricultural changes affecting farmland birds in Britain is the loss of mixed farming. Livestock farming predominates in north and west Britain where there has been a decline in the extent of arable cropping. In these regions, even small areas of stubbles, especially if overwintered, and of crops can be especially important food sources for declining farmland birds. This is particularly the case for small seed-eaters such as larks, buntings and finches. Spring-sown crops also provide safe sites for ground-nesting birds. Livestock farmers who grow fodder crops, such as spring cereals, kale, rape or turnips, are helping farmland birds in their area to survive.

Arable crops provide important food for seed-eating birds in areas that are mostly agricultural grasslands.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Stubble fields provide valuable winter food for seed-eating birds

Many declining farmland birds are small, seed-eating species. They have declined more where livestock farming predominates. Over-winter stubbles following spring cereals can provide spilt grain and weed seeds for birds through winter. A herbicide regime that allows some weed growth increases the availability of weed seeds, insects and cover. Undersown stubbles are also valuable, as they remain unploughed all winter, and are places for breeding birds like grey

partridges to forage in the following spring.

Fodder brassicas provide valuable weed seeds for winter food

Cereal grains in stubbles are too large for some small seed-eating birds, such as linnets and twites, to eat. Crops of fodder brassicas such as turnips, rape and kale, traditionally managed to allow weeds to grow and set seed, are a very important source of food for small seed-eaters. The crop also provides shelter and, after it is lifted or grazed, the birds can forage.

Arable crops provide a good breeding habitat

Vegetation structure can determine whether ground-nesting birds will breed successfully. Arable crops can be suitable for skylarks and corn buntings to nest in. Spring cropping gives bare soil and short vegetation, suitable for lapwings and skylarks. By spring, autumn- and winter-sown crops are too tall and dense for many birds to nest in. Crops with little or no herbicides and pesticides provide the most food for birds, including grey partridge chicks.

HOW CAN I INTRODUCE AND MANAGE ARABLE CROPS?

Root crops and other fodder brassicas

- Turnips and fodder brassicas with lots of weeds are particularly important for wintering farmland birds. Broad-leaved weed seeds can be eaten from late summer onwards. Important weeds include fat hens, hemp nettles, charlocks and chickweeds. Birds will find seeds until the land is turned over. Some species, like skylarks, use these fields after the crop has been lifted or grazed.
- When crops are establishing, you may need to control weeds. The more weeds you can allow and leave to set seed, the greater the benefit is to birds.
- Fodder brassicas established in July and grazed off by the following February/March provide ideal nesting habitat for lapwings, provided it is not ploughed before the end of June.

Combinable fodder crops

- Spring-sowing is more beneficial than autumn/winter-sowing when it allows over-winter stubbles. Stubble fields can provide feeding places for seed-eating birds in winter. After sowing, bare ground is suitable for nesting lapwings. Later in the spring, skylarks can nest in the growing crop. The stages of seed-bed preparation should all be completed as quickly as possible (ideally within a few days). The longer this takes, the greater risk of nests being destroyed.
- Combinable crops generally provide food for seed-eating birds from the ripening of the

crop to cultivation of stubble. Farmland birds also eat the seeds of weeds that germinate during crop establishment and after harvesting.

Whole-crop silage

- Whole-crop silage isn't as good for birds as combinable crops. However, spring-sown whole-crop silage is better than autumn-sown because the seeds and grains in over-winter stubbles provide a good source of food. Spring tillage also creates nesting areas for lapwings and skylarks.
- Whole-crop silage is usually harvested green and drops no seed, but it can be a source of weed seeds for birds. Unripe grain of whole-crop cereals can feed corn bunting chicks, especially when large insects are not available.
- A wide range of silage crops are now grown, including cereals and mixes of cereals with pulses or brassicas. These can provide seed food when they are establishing and after harvest. They also provide nesting habitat for grey partridges, skylarks and buntings. Birds will feed on seed spilt when bales are broken up or fed to stock.

Sacrificial crops

- Seeds from small areas of cereals or oil-seed rape crops left standing at harvest, e.g. due to waterlogged ground conditions, can benefit birds by providing food in the autumn/winter. Even small areas along margins or in field corners are worthwhile.

Wild bird cover

- Wild bird cover mixtures are particularly useful on livestock farms with no arable crops. A mix of crops is usually established in spring and maintained for one or two years. You can use wild bird cover in field corners and on marginal strips.

KEY POINTS

- **Combinable crops, weedy root crops and other fodder brassicas can all provide food for seed-eating birds in predominantly grassland systems.**
- **As an alternative, where arable crops cannot be incorporated into the farming system, even small plots sown with wild bird cover be very beneficial.**
- **Farmers may be able to receive agri-environment funding for management of wild bird cover, winter stubbles and spring cropping.**
- **Arable crops should not be grown on fields with a high risk of soil erosion and runoff, or created by ploughing grassland that have environmental or archaeological interest.**

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Brassica and root fodder crops
- Wild bird cover
- Arable field margins

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

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



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