One of the major agricultural changes affecting farmland birds in Britain has been the loss of mixed farming. Livestock farming predominates in north and west Britain, where there has been a decline in the area of arable crops. In such areas, seed-rich habitats such as weedy brassica and root fodder crops and spring cereals can be especially important for declining bird species, particularly seed-eating birds such as buntings, finches and larks. Arable crops can also provide a safe nesting habitat for ground-nesting birds.

**BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

- **Stubble fields provide valuable winter food for seed-eating birds**
  The stubbles that follow cereals can provide spilt grain and weed seeds that help seed-eaters such as yellowhammers and tree sparrows to survive the winter.

- **Fodder brassica and root crops can provide valuable weed seeds for winter food**
  Fodder brassica and root crops, where weeds are allowed to persist in the crop and set seed, provide an important habitat for the many small, seed-eating bird species, particularly linnets and twites, that depend on the seeds of weeds.

- **Arable crops provide a good nesting habitat for several farmland bird species**
  Arable crops can provide a suitable breeding habitat for grey partridges, skylarks and buntings. Spring cropping provides opportunities for lapwings to nest.
**How Can I Introduce and Manage Arable Crops?**

### Rotation
- Arable crops in a rotation with grassland are best fitted between short- or medium-term leyss to keep the arable weed seed bank alive. Depending on the size of the arable weed seed bank, the majority of beneficial weeds are likely to become unviable within ten years, so need regular opportunities to germinate.
- Arable crops should not be grown on fields with a high risk of soil erosion and runoff, or created by ploughing grasslands that have environmental or historical interest.

### Cereal crops
- Insects associated with broad-leaved weeds within the crop are important food for the chicks of many farmland birds. Ripening cereal grains and those spilled at harvest provide food for seed-eating birds. Birds also eat the seeds of weeds that germinate during crop establishment and after harvesting. Stubbles offer food for seed-eating birds until the ground is turned over or seed is depleted.
- Crop management that controls the most damaging weeds, pests and diseases, but leaves as many of the less competitive weeds and non-target insects as possible, will provide significant benefits to farmland wildlife.
- Spring cereal crops offer the best wildlife benefits as they can normally be grown with no insecticide sprays and many of the spring-germinating weeds are very beneficial for birds and insects. Spring cereals have a crop structure that is suitable for a number of ground-nesting birds.

### Maize
- Maize is not generally useful to birds as it requires relatively weed-free conditions during its establishment. Its structure makes it unsuitable for most ground-nesting birds.
- Lapwings can nest on the bare ground created during preparation of the seedbed. Field operations in the spring should be concentrated into as short a time as possible, ideally within a week, so that any failed pairs can nest again.

### Fodder brassicas and root crops
- Turnips, swedes, kale and other fodder crops with high weed populations are particularly important for wintering farmland birds. Broad-leaved weeds grow along with the crop and birds take their seeds from within the crop and from the soil surface after the crop is grazed or harvested. Important weeds include fat hens, redshanks, charlocks and chickweeds.
- While it may be necessary to control weeds in some crops during establishment, if you can tolerate weeds that germinate with the crop and leave them to set seed, this will be of great benefit to birds. Once established, brassica crops are good competitors with weeds.

### Wild bird seed mixture
- Wild bird seed mixtures are particularly beneficial on livestock farms with no arable crops. You can grow these in field corners and margins. A mix of crops is generally established in spring and maintained for one or two years.

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**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

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