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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE IN WALES

Arable crops on livestock farms



M Hancock (rspb-images.com)

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

One of the major agricultural changes that has affected farmland birds in Britain has been the loss of mixed farming. Livestock farming predominates in Wales, and there has been a decline in arable crops. Here, spring crops can be especially important for declining bird species, particularly seed-eating birds such as larks and finches. Arable crops also provide a safe nesting habitat for ground-nesting birds. Maintaining or introducing fodder crops, such as spring cereals or turnips, can be highly beneficial for a range of declining bird species in Wales.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Stubble fields provide valuable winter food for seed-eating birds

Many of the declining farmland bird species are small, seed-eating birds. Their decline has been greatest in those areas of Britain where livestock farming predominates. The stubble that follows spring cereals usually provides abundant food for birds throughout the winter due to the availability of spilt grain and weed seeds.

Fodder brassicas provide valuable weed seeds for winter food

Many small, seed-eating bird species, particularly linnets and twites, depend on the seeds of weeds for winter survival as they are poorly adapted to take spilt grain in cereal stubbles. Traditionally managed crops of fodder brassicas (such as turnips, rape and kale), where weeds are allowed to persist in the crop and set seed, provide an important habitat for small seed-eaters and other birds like partridges. Important weeds include fat hen, charlock and chickweed.

Arable crops provide a good nesting habitat for several farmland bird species

Vegetation structure is often the crucial factor determining the ability of ground-nesting birds to breed on a farm. Arable crops can provide a suitable breeding habitat for grey partridges, skylarks and buntings. Spring cropping also provides a breeding habitat for lapwings, as well as an improved habitat for skylarks.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I INTRODUCE AND MANAGE ARABLE CROPS?

COMBINABLE FODDER CROPS

- Spring-sown crops are more beneficial than other types as they allow the retention of stubbles that offer food for seed-eating birds throughout the winter. They also provide bare ground in the spring for breeding lapwings, and nesting habitat for skylarks throughout the summer.
- Combinable crops generally provide food for seed-eating birds right through from the ripening of the crop to cultivation of the stubble. Such bird species also eat the seeds of those weeds that germinate during crop establishment and after harvesting.

WHOLE-CROP SILAGE

- The benefits of whole-crop silage for birds are, again, more numerous with spring-sown than autumn-sown crops, because winter stubble provides a seed source and spring tillage offers nesting habitat for lapwings.
- Although this crop is harvested green and drops no seed, whole-crop silage can still be a source of weed seeds for seed-eating birds. In particular, the unripe grain of whole-crop cereals can be a vital food source for bunting chicks, especially when large insects are not available.

MAIZE

- Maize is not generally that useful to birds as it requires relatively weed-free conditions during its establishment. In addition, its structure makes it unsuitable for use by most ground-nesting birds. Lapwings, however, can nest on the bare ground created during preparation of the seedbed.
- You should try to avoid lapwing nests during establishment operations, and condense all operations within one week so any failed pairs can nest again.
- If you drill the headland or undersow maize with a seed-bearing crop such as linseed, this may provide seed for birds through the winter. Undersowing may also help control soil erosion on maize-cropped land.

ROOT CROPS AND OTHER FODDER BRASSICAS

- Turnips, kale and other fodder root crops with high weed populations are particularly important for wintering farmland birds. Broad-leaved weeds grow along with the crop and their seeds become available to birds as the crop is grazed or harvested. Strip grazing is ideal as it ensures that new seed sources are exposed throughout the winter.

- You may find it necessary to control weeds during crop establishment to get a good yield, but if you can tolerate any weeds that germinate with the crop and leave them to set seed, this will be of great benefit to birds. Tir Gofal can fund unsprayed root crops.

WILDLIFE COVER CROPS

- Wildlife cover crops are particularly useful on livestock farms with no arable crops. You can use these in field corners and on marginal strips. A mix of crops is generally established in spring and can be maintained for two years.
- Kale, cereals and quinoa are particularly useful components for seed-eating birds such as partridges, finches and buntings. (For more information on this, see the separate sheet entitled 'Wildlife cover crops (wild bird cover)'. These can be funded by Tir Gofal.

KEY POINTS

- Combinable crops, whole-crop silage, weedy root crops and other fodder brassicas can all provide useful food sources for seed-eating birds in predominantly grassland systems.
- Tir Gofal can fund unsprayed crops, winter stubbles, undersown crops and wildlife cover crops.
- Where there is no scope to incorporate any form of arable crop into the farming system, small plots sown with wild bird cover or wildlife cover crops can be very beneficial.

Many of these guidelines may be funded by Tir Gofal, the agri-environment scheme for Wales. Get further info from:



Advisory Officer, The RSPB, North Wales Office, Maes Y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.
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