Under cross compliance, 2 m from the centre of hedges and ditches (or 1 m from the top of ditch banks for ditches wider than 2 m) need to be left uncultivated, unsprayed and unfertilised. Wider margins, or margins elsewhere on the farm can be created using Entry Level or Higher Level Stewardship, or set-aside. Two types of margin can be established: rough grass margins for birds, mammals and over-wintering insects, and wild flower margins for pollinating insects. Permanent strips are not appropriate along field margins with rare arable plants, which require regular cultivation.

**BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

**Grass margins can provide nest sites for ground-nesting birds**
A tussocky grass strip against a short, thick hedge provides an ideal habitat for ground-nesting birds such as grey partridges, yellowhammers and whitethroats. Corn buntings may use the same kind of strip alongside hedgeless field boundaries.

**Grass margins and wild flower margins boost numbers of beneficial insects and spiders on arable farmland**
Tussocky grass margins provide over-wintering habitat for many welcome insects and spiders that will feed on crop pests in the spring. They are also used by grasshoppers, sawflies and other insects that provide chick food for birds. Wild flower margins attract nectar-feeding insects such as bumblebees, and hoverflies, which lay their eggs in crops where there are aphids for the larvae to feed on.

**Grass margins provide habitat for small mammals**
Populations of small mammals, such as voles and harvest mice, are able to build up in wide grass margins, providing ideal hunting habitat for barn owls and kestrels. Wide margins away from roadsides can reduce the risk of barn owls being killed by road traffic.
**HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE BUFFER STRIPS?**

**ELS OELS SA** Existing field margins
- Maintaining existing field margins is at least as important as creating new ones as they are likely to have built up a variety of native plants and insects over time.

**ELS OELS HLS SA** Management of rough grass margins
- After the first year, rough grass margins should be cut no more than once every five years to allow mature tussocks to establish and insect populations to build up. They should be cut in the autumn on a rotation so that there are plenty of uncut margins every year. If possible, cut and remove or chop and spread the cuttings to avoid smothering the sward underneath.
- For margins that are 6 m wide or more, annual cutting of the half next to the crop in the autumn is beneficial to add diversity to the habitat, particularly beneficial to foraging birds and hunting owls.
- Regular traffic on the margins will reduce the wildlife value, but one-off operations outside the nesting season, such as hedge-trimming, will have negligible effects.
- Avoid any spray drift or fertiliser spread into the margin, as it will reduce plant diversity and only benefit weeds.
- Spot treat or weed-wipe thistles, docks or ragwort whenever they occur to prevent numbers building up.
- If grass leys are in the rotation, then leave the margins uncultivated, uncut and unfertilised. If practical, exclude grazing from some margins to maintain insect populations.
- Management to achieve good weed control is the priority in the first year. Cut regularly in the first spring/summer to top annual grass weeds and encourage perennial grasses to tiller. Barren brome can be controlled using fluazifop-P-butyl in November/December (but not on the cross compliance area).

**HLS** Management of wild flower margins
- Under the HLS option (floristically enhanced grass margin), you should agree a mix and management regime with your RDS adviser.
- Use a mix of fine grasses, such as fescues and bents. Wild flower seed should comprise between 5% and 20% of the mix by weight and include native plants such as knapweed, scabious, yarrow and bird’s-foot trefoil.
- Where possible, use a local seed source. Seek advice to find out if there is local seed available.
- Wild flower strips are best established along margins that receive plenty of sunlight but are sheltered from prevailing winds to boost insect activity.
- Drill the grass and broadcast the wild flower seed before rolling.
- Cut or graze annually in the autumn and, if necessary to suppress grass competition with the flowering plants, again in March. Removal of cuttings is beneficial to reduce fertility levels and prevent smothering of the sward underneath.

**SA**

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

- **RSPB**
  Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
  Tel: 01767 680551
  www.rspb.org.uk/farming

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

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

**KEY POINTS**
- Natural regeneration is better for wildlife but also more prone to weed problems – not advisable on heavy soils or where you get annual grass weeds, thistles or docks.
- When sowing a mix, create a fine seedbed and focus on weed control throughout the first year.
- Use a range of margin types, widths and management regimes to deliver the most benefits.
- Protect the margins from misplaced pesticides, fertilisers and manures, and do not use them for regular access or storage for the best wildlife results.

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