



for birds  
for people  
for ever

**FARMING FOR WILDLIFE**  
**Buffer strips**  
**on grassland**



D Buckingham (rspb-images.com)

Tussocky buffer strips boost overwintering insect populations and provide nesting habitat for birds and mammals.

When grasses and herbs are left ungrazed or uncut long enough, it allows them to produce a number of benefits to birds. They provide seeds, large, long-lived insects, and develop a structure that can be used by nesting birds. Leaving uncut margins around mown grass fields or fencing off areas in grazed pasture can provide such habitat. As well as being valuable habitats in their own right, they can be used to buffer boundary features such as watercourses, hedgerows and walls. Buffer strips on grassland can be specifically managed under Environmental Stewardship.

**BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

**Buffer strips can provide habitat rich in seeds and insects**

Broad-leaved plants that flower and go to seed provide pollen, nectar and seeds, benefiting pollinating insect populations and seed-eating birds such as linnets.

Rough grassland harbours large, long-lived insects whose life cycle would be disrupted by the mowing or grazing that takes place on the rest of the field. These insects are an important

food source for birds, especially when collecting food for chicks.

**Several ground-nesting birds and mammals will use tussocky buffer strips**

Rough grassland situated against a short, dense hedge provides an ideal nesting habitat for grey partridges, whitethroats and yellowhammers, while tall vegetation along damp areas such as ditches will benefit reed buntings.

Tussocky vegetation will be colonised by small mammals that are in turn hunted by kestrels and barn owls.

**GUIDELINES OVERLEAF**

ELS

OELS

HLS

SA

## HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE WILDLIFE-RICH BUFFER STRIPS?

### Why create wildlife habitats on field margins?

- Field margins are often the least productive parts of a field, where factors such as shade, compaction and less efficient input coverage generally reduce productivity.
- The management of buffer strips offers a simple way of creating some very valuable wildlife habitats next to agriculturally improved grassland.
- They can be used to simplify machinery operations and keep machinery away from roots, hedge growth and fences.

### Creating buffer strips

- Buffer strips can be any width, but usually vary between two and six metres. They can also be of variable width to straighten up field boundaries, such as alongside meandering watercourses. Wider margins next to hedgerows and watercourses can be particularly beneficial in developing wide wildlife corridors and linking up natural habitats such as woodlands. As many of the birds that collect insects and seeds from these areas through the breeding season have small home ranges, the creation of many small areas across the landscape will support more breeding birds.
- Generally, two types of buffer strip can be adopted – tussocky grassland or wild flower areas.

### Tussocky grassland

- Rough grassland can be created by temporarily or permanently fencing off areas

from livestock. Access to the area needs to be maintained using temporary fencing or a gate to allow occasional management.

- The area will need to be occasionally grazed or cut to prevent domination by scrub – though leaving some patches of scrub to develop will be desirable for many species.
- Management should occur from September onwards, and different areas should be managed in different years to provide a continuity of habitats around the farm.
- It is possible to create tussocky grassland without the need for fencing by not cutting the margins of hay, silage or zero-grazed fields where subsequent grazing pressure is sufficiently light to maintain a tussocky vegetation structure.
- Tussocky grassland can generally be established from existing vegetation as plants that favour the limited grazing or cutting will gradually take over.

### Wild flower grassland

- Wild flower areas can be created in corners and margins of mown fields, where broad-leaved flowering plants are present, by simply leaving them uncut. These areas need to be annually grazed off or the vegetation cut and removed in the autumn to prevent coarser grasses dominating.
- Where broad-leaved flowering plants are not present, a wild flower margin can be established using a suitable seed mix. Knapweed, yarrow and legumes such as red clover and trefoils are valuable nectar sources for a variety of insects and can be relatively

easily established. A wider diversity of flowers can be established in soils with lower fertility levels, ideally using native seed.

- These habitats are best sited in areas that receive a lot of sunlight to attract insect activity.

### Other management considerations

- Once established, retain buffer strips if the remainder of the field is cultivated and avoid fertilisers and pesticides drifting onto them. Flowers and less competitive grasses begin to disappear at the lowest levels of fertiliser application (25 kgN/ha). Herbicides also kill beneficial herbs.
- If a pernicious weed problem develops, then the problem area can be topped or treated by spot spraying with a selective herbicide or by weed wiping.
- Unfenced buffer strips in fields that are mown can be marked with prominent stakes to ensure the margin is not cut with the main part of the field.

## USING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

- **ELS** **OELS** The ELS and OELS schemes fund 2, 4 and 6 metre buffer strips on improved grassland and the buffering of in-field ponds in improved grassland. The HLS scheme funds enhanced buffer strips on intensive grassland specifically managed to benefit the species present on the site.

## KEY POINTS

- Buffer strips can be managed to provide grassland rich in invertebrates, seeds and small mammals.
- Management can be manipulated to create tussocky grassland or pollen- and nectar-rich habitats.

### KEY

**ELS** = Entry Level Stewardship

**OELS** = Organic 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:



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UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,  
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Tel: 01767 680551  
[www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)



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