



Buffer strips on grassland



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

When grasses and other plants are left ungrazed or uncut long enough, it allows them to produce a number of benefits to birds. They provide seeds, support 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.

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 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.

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.
- Strips that are sited along water courses can help to fulfil cross compliance requirements and reduce diffuse pollution.

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 until February, 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.

Wildflower/species-rich 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 maximise 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 with a selective herbicide by spot spraying 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.

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.
- Locating buffer strips along watercourses can reduce diffuse pollution.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Arable field margins
- Improved grassland
- Silage and hay management.

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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