



for birds
for people
for ever



FARMING FOR WILDLIFE
**Conservation
headlands**



Sites should be chosen carefully so that management will encourage a sprinkling of broad-leaved weeds within the cereal crop.

Conservation headlands are headlands of cereal crops that are sprayed selectively to allow small populations of broad-leaved weeds and their associated insects to develop. Headlands should be chosen carefully to avoid encouraging a flush of highly competitive weeds. Management involves avoiding the use of broad-leaved herbicides in the crop, and avoiding the use of insecticides after 15 March. In Environmental Stewardship, there are also options for not using any fertilisers or manure, and for leaving the headlands unharvested.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Allows a sprinkling of broad-leaved plants in the cereal crop margin

Conservation headlands in appropriate places will contain small populations of broad-leaved plants, which have only a small competitive impact on the crop. This management is ideal for sites with rare arable plant populations, but is also appropriate along field margins in areas with light soils that are unlikely to be infested with highly competitive plants such as barren brome or cleavers.

Boosts insect numbers in the crop margin

Broad-leaved arable plants support a high diversity of insects that do no harm to the crop and, in turn, support populations of predatory insects, which help to control crop pests. Tussocky grass margins provide an ideal over-wintering habitat for many such insects. They move into the crop in the spring and, as a result, need protection from insecticides after 15 March. The overall effect of conservation headland management is to boost the numbers of beneficial insects in the crop margin.

Provides ideal feeding habitat for partridge chicks

Many farmland bird species feed their chicks on insects for the first few weeks of life. Grey partridge chicks, in particular, forage on the ground in cereal crops, which give them shelter without being so dense as to impede their movement or to soak them in wet weather. An abundance of insects in the crop margin is essential to the survival of these birds.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I SITE AND MANAGE CONSERVATION HEADLANDS?

ELS HLS Where to site them

- The ideal location for conservation headlands is alongside tussocky grass margins or beetle banks to provide the best habitat for insects and partridge broods.
- Conservation headland management is most suited to light soils in locations that do not suffer from high burdens of competitive grass weeds or cleavers, or have records of herbicide-resistant grass weeds.
- Conservation headland management is only suited to cereal crops and rotates with these crops around the arable area.
- If you find that an unexpected infestation of weeds develops which you cannot control with selective herbicides, then select a more appropriate location in following years.

ELS Management

- Conservation headlands generally extend between 6 and 24 m from the crop edge, and the sprayer boom is switched off when spraying insecticides after 15 March or herbicides that target broad-leaved weeds.
- You should check conservation headlands in February/March, and again in May, for any significant weed problems. Cleavers can be selectively treated using amidosulfuron in February or March. If other broad-leaved weeds create a significant problem then you should seek advice from a BASIS trained agronomist and your Defra RDS adviser.
- Use appropriate sprayer technology and weather conditions to minimise spray drift into conservation headlands.
- If necessary, a pre-harvest desiccant can be

used to enable harvesting, but wildlife benefits are greater if none is used, especially if the subsequent stubble can be left over winter to provide weed seeds for birds.

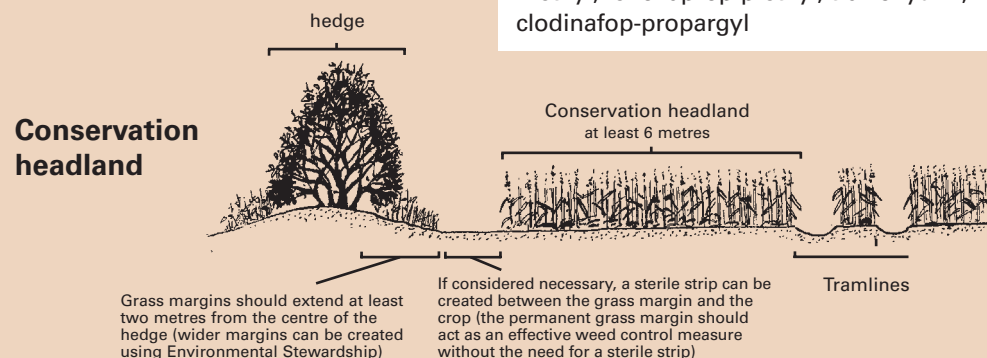
- Where acceptable weed contamination thresholds are low, conservation headlands may be harvested separately for animal or game feed (or see unharvested option below).

ELS Conservation headlands with no fertiliser or manure

- Less competitive arable plants benefit from the exclusion of fertilisers and manure, and this can also reduce the burden of invasive weeds such as cleavers. The more open crop structure also benefits some bird species. The increased yield loss is compensated for by the higher payment rate in Entry Level Stewardship.

HLS Unharvested, fertiliser-free conservation headlands

- Under Higher Level Stewardship, conservation headlands can be left unharvested and unsprayed to provide a wild bird cover



through the winter. There is also an option to leave them throughout the following set-aside period until 15 July. These may be useful if the headland crop is not likely to meet the standard required. They are particularly beneficial for seed-eating birds through the winter.

Insecticide use on crop margins

- Even where the placement of conservation headlands is inappropriate owing to a high weed burden, you may consider leaving margins unsprayed whenever insecticide is used on a cereal crop after 15 March. A reduction of spraying of this type will increase the food available to birds and buffer the insect-rich field margins from the effects of spray drift.

Examples of acceptable sprays for conservation headlands

All fungicides

All plant growth regulators

Cleaver control: amidosulfuron

Grass weed control: tri-allate, diclofop-methyl, fenoxaprop-p-ethyl, tralkoxydim, clodinafop-propargyl

KEY POINTS

- Conservation headland management is most suited to areas with low infestations of competitive grass weeds and cleavers, and no records of herbicide-resistant grass weeds, particularly on light soils.
- Conservation headlands can boost predatory insect numbers and this helps with pest control.
- Avoiding the use of insecticides in cereal headlands is a useful measure where full conservation headland management is not appropriate.

KEY

- ELS** = Entry Level Stewardship
- HLS** = Higher Level Stewardship

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



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Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk/farming



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire
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For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info.