

Farm buildings

Above: Old and new farm buildings can provide opportunities for a range of wildlife.

Although traditional farm buildings made from natural materials have the greatest wildlife value, a lot can be done to improve the wildlife value of modern agricultural buildings. Farm buildings are particularly important for several species of birds and bats. Providing nesting and roosting sites alone is not enough to maintain populations. Feeding habitat around the farmyard and in the surrounding farmland is also essential.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Many birds and bats make use of farm buildings for nesting and roosting, taking advantage of features such as eaves, beams, ledges, crevices in walls and access to roof spaces. The table overleaf summarises the key features required for the species of conservation concern that are most likely to use farm buildings.

Old traditional buildings may also be important for plants such as ferns, mosses and lichens, and numerous insects.

The area around farm buildings also makes an important contribution to farm wildlife. Bats, swallows and house martins seek insects attracted to manure heaps. Spilt grain and hayseeds provides food for sparrows, finches and yellowhammers, helping such species survive the winter.



It is important that wildlife is taken into consideration when traditional buildings are restored, have maintenance work done or are converted to new uses. Features that have attracted wildlife in the past should be retained wherever possible. Local authorities have a legal responsibility to establish the presence of barn owls, bats and other protected species before building work commences and may require mitigation as part of the project. All 16 species of bat in the UK are fully protected, as are their roost sites. It is illegal to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a bat roost.

Avoid removing mosses, ferns and lichens from roofs and walls, as besides their own wildlife value, many species of invertebrate will be associated with these plants.

New buildings tend to provide fewer opportunities for wildlife. However, much can be done to improve the value of modern buildings to birds and other wildlife. Nest boxes for a range of species can be attached to the inside or outside of farm buildings or incorporated into the building with entrance holes on the outside. Even buildings that need to exclude wildlife such as grain stores can incorporate the latter. Entrance holes are best faced towards undisturbed cover such as trees. Planting native climbers such as ivy or honeysuckle to grow against buildings, and landscaping the area around buildings with trees and shrubs

of local provenance provide habitat and help blend buildings into the landscape.

Order of priority for maintaining bird nesting and roosting sites in buildings

- 1 Leave existing nest sites alone.
- 2 Create new entrance holes.
- 3 Create new opportunities in existing buildings, such as internal ledges or boxes fitted under exposed overhanging roofs.
- 4 Use external nest boxes as a last resort.

The area around farm buildings makes an important contribution to farm wildlife. Allowing rough areas of grassland, brambles and other weeds to develop offers nectar for invertebrates as well as cover and seeds for birds. Water around the yard can be especially attractive. Reduce the chances of owls and other wildlife drowning by floating a wooden plank or plastic tray in drinking troughs.

Providing nest sites alone is not enough to maintain populations of birds. Food resources around the farmyard and good foraging habitat in the surrounding farmland are vital. Birds breeding around farm buildings are more likely to be successful if they do not need to travel far to find food.

Rats are less welcome mammals in farm buildings. New 'second generation' rodenticides, such as brodifacoum, bromadiolone and difenacoum, are much more toxic to domestic animals, birds of prey and other wildlife than warfarin, so these will need to be managed with extreme care. In particular:

- Prevent access to bait by birds and other animals.
- Search for rodent bodies and dispose of them safely.
- Remove all remains of bait and bait containers after treatment and dispose of it safely.

KEY POINTS

- Make existing buildings as attractive to wildlife as possible.
- Ensure features that have attracted wildlife in the past are maintained when buildings are restored or converted to new uses.
- Establish plenty of wildlife rich feeding habitats around the yard and in the surrounding farmland.



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

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK charity that speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.

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



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The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654
775-0140-09-10

Table 1: Features in farm buildings required by species of conservation concern

Species	Typical nest sites	Alternatives	
<p>Barn owl</p> 	<p>Barn owls were so valued for rodent control that many barns were built with small windows to allow them access. Barn owls will nest on internal ledges and floors above rafters.</p>	<p>Buildings can continue to provide nesting and roosting sites for the barn owl after conversion through an owl window and loft. Behind the window, board off an area beneath the apex of the roof to provide a floor area of not less than 90 cm by 90 cm. A half partition gives the nesting female more protection. Alternatively, a large box inside the upper roof space of buildings or high on external wall may be used, but suitable perches will need to be constructed where absent. Boxes can also be located on poles sited within field boundaries.</p>	
<p>Kestrel</p> 	<p>Uses open access through loft gable window or similar. Nests on internal ledges and sills, usually in proximity to window.</p>	<p>Window and loft or large open-fronted box, high on external wall.</p>	
<p>Swallow</p> 	<p>Relies heavily on access to farm buildings for nesting sites as it feeds on insects over the open countryside, particularly in association with grazing livestock. Nest sites are traditional and provided the food supply has not changed, the same nests or sites are used from one year to another, frequently by the same two birds. Prefers outbuildings that provide dark ledges or rafters.</p>	<p>Maintain access to the inside of buildings wherever possible. Swallows can enter a building through a very small gap (5 cm high by 7 cm wide) and need very little light. Maintain ledges/beams where present or provide shelving, high in the building specifically for nesting platforms.</p>	
<p>House martin</p> 	<p>Nest under eaves of suitable buildings between 5 and 10 m above ground.</p>	<p>House martins cannot build nests on plastic or metal surfaces, so lining eaves with suitable materials such as wooden planks will provide a nest-building opportunity. Several pre-fabricated nests can be placed alongside each other to encourage house martins.</p>	
<p>Spotted flycatcher</p> 	<p>Builds small cup nest on wall protected by climber (eg ivy) or wall shrub.</p>	<p>Open-fronted box placed under climber (eg ivy) or wall shrub.</p>	
<p>Starling</p> 	<p>Nests behind soffits and facias. Also, inside chimneys and between wall cavities.</p>	<p>Nest box with 45 mm hole. Box to be about 30% deeper than conventional box.</p>	<p>Internal or external nest box. Ideally, provide small holes on the outside of a building that give access to a larger open space. Internal boxes can be located behind facias and soffits. Leave gaps when re-pointing or walling.</p>
<p>House sparrow</p> 	<p>Nests behind soffits, facias and holes in brick/stone work. Also nests under roof tiles and ridges.</p>	<p>Nest box with 32 mm hole. Nests in loose colonies so several boxes near to each other will be of greatest benefit.</p>	
<p>Tree sparrow</p> 	<p>Nests behind holes in brick/stone work and under roof tiles and ridges.</p>	<p>Nest box with 28 mm hole. Nests in loose colonies so several boxes near to each other will be of greatest benefit.</p>	
<p>Bats</p> 	<p>Houses and buildings (both old and modern). Will roost under eaves, tiles, flashings, and in lofts, cavity walls, crevices, and underground sites such as cellars and icehouses.</p>	<p>Maintain access to existing sites. If bats use a building, then a Habitats Regulations license is required before any work is undertaken. This license will require a bat survey, which will determine what can be done. Any chemical treatment to a bat roost will also require permission. Permethrin and Cypermethrin are least harmful to mammals. Some species will use bat boxes, but these cannot be used to replace normal roosts.</p>	

Providing nest sites alone will not support local populations. Feeding habitat in the surrounding area is also vital.