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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

# Hay and silage meadows



Tim Melling (rspb-images.com)

The management of hay and silage meadows determines the availability of important nesting and feeding habitat in the countryside.

The switch from hay to silage has been one of the most significant changes in agriculture over the last century. While helping to ensure the availability of good quality winter forage for livestock, it has allowed changes in grassland management that have reduced wildlife interest. **Although traditional hay meadows have the greatest wildlife value, modifications in the management of agriculturally improved meadows can benefit birds.**

## BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

### Meadows can provide nesting habitat for a number of birds

Ground-nesting birds that require cover, such as the curlew, skylark, yellow wagtail, whinchat and corn bunting, can nest in meadows. Meadows with wet flushes may have snipe and redshanks.

### Meadows can provide food for seed-eating birds

Shutting fields up from grazing livestock can allow broad-leaved plants in the sward to flower and seed, providing summer food for seed-eaters like the linnet, and nectar and pollen for insects.

### Unimproved hay meadows hold a rare community of plants

Hay meadows that are the product of traditional, low intensity farming support a rich variety of grasses and flowers. Such meadows are now a rare and irreplaceable habitat.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

## HOW CAN I MANAGE MEADOWS TO BENEFIT WILDLIFE?

### Nesting habitat

- Ground-nesting birds that require cover are attracted to fields shut up for hay or silage. They then need a certain period to complete incubation and for chicks to be able to be moved out of the field before mowing. The length of time birds require from stock removal to mowing will vary between species and how quickly birds start nesting. For example, skylarks are likely to require at least seven weeks between stock removal and mowing.
- **ELS** **OELS** In fields where waders (snipe, lapwings, redshanks, curlews) breed, leave damp hollows/corners uncut as unfledged chicks are most likely to use these areas.
- Ground-nesting birds are most commonly found in hay meadows as the grassland management generally results in vegetation that is less dense and cut at a more mature stage. Silage or haylage may also be used, but timing of cutting is critical as the early and repeated cutting that takes place in many silage fields is more likely to destroy eggs and chicks.
- Mechanical operations such as muck spreading, harrowing and rolling are often associated with hay and silage management. Wherever possible, they should be timed before or after the breeding season in fields with ground-nesting birds. The critical breeding period for different birds is detailed in species advisory sheets.
- When the grass harvest is spread out over the summer, different fields provide a succession of opportunities for nesting and feeding birds in the local landscape.

### Feeding habitat

- Broad-leaved plants that flower and seed within meadows provide summer food for seed-eating birds such as the linnet and twite. Traditional hay meadows are particularly valuable, but meadows do not have to have a great variety of plants to be of value. Dandelion and sorrel are native herbs that often remain in semi-improved grasslands, providing valuable summer seed food. The resulting livestock fodder can also provide winter food for sparrows, finches and buntings, particularly when fed outdoors. Targeted herbicides should be used minimally to prevent killing these beneficial herbs.
- **ELS** **OELS** Leaving uncut margins and corners in mown fields enhances the availability of seeds and nectar if broad-leaved plants are present, and can provide valuable habitat for insects and small mammals.
- Aftermath grazing benefits most bird species by improving access to their invertebrate and seed food.

### **HLS** Traditional hay meadows

- Traditional hay meadows have developed their special interest because of historical management. It is important that these long-established management practices continue. The sequence that meadows were usually cut in determined whether early or late-flowering plants thrived. Some meadows have traditionally been grazed in the spring, while others have not.

- Aftermath grazing is important in providing bare ground and dung areas that offer opportunities for the germination of seeds.
- The application of small quantities of farmyard manure is not a problem where there is a tradition of such management. Artificial fertilisers should not be used as herbs and less competitive grasses begin to disappear, even at the lowest application rates (25 kg N/ha).
- It can be very difficult to restore the flower-rich plant communities of traditional hay meadows on agriculturally improved and semi-improved grassland. Suitable sites and management need to be carefully chosen, and advice should be sought.

### USING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

- The ELS and OELS schemes fund the management of permanent grassland with low/very low inputs. The HLS can fund the maintenance, restoration and creation of species-rich, semi-natural grassland, with a supplement available for haymaking.

## KEY POINTS

- Timing of cutting is critical to ground-nesting birds.
- Meadows can be an important source of food for seed-eating birds.
- Plants and other wildlife associated with traditional hay meadows need long-established management practices to continue.

### KEY

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

For full details, refer to Defra scheme handbooks.

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



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