



for birds
for people
for ever

FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Reversion of arable/ temporary grassland



Trace Williams

Downland recently reverted from arable to chalk grassland to protect archaeological features and extend chalk grassland habitat.

Arable land, set-aside or grassland of low wildlife value can be reverted to important wildlife habitats, buffer or link areas of existing importance, protect underlying archaeological features, prevent soil erosion or strengthen landscapes. The creation of important wildlife habitats that have become rare and fragmented will benefit birds and other wildlife associated with them. Even small pockets of grassland have significant wildlife benefits in landscapes dominated by arable cultivation.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Habitats of high conservation value can be created on suitable land.

Some habitats of high conservation value have become particularly rare and fragmented, leading to a decline in species dependent on them. Biodiversity Action Plan habitats such as lowland wet grassland, heathland, chalk grassland, acid grassland, and certain types of scrub or woodland, can be created, helping to reverse historical losses.

Arable reversion increases the variety of habitat in predominantly arable areas.

Birds and other wildlife benefit from mosaics of habitat, such as those provided by mixed farming. Where arable farming dominates, the reversion of small areas of arable land to grassland can provide important invertebrate-rich feeding areas, and be used as nesting habitat if suitably managed.

In pastoral landscapes, pockets of arable land are vital in maintaining populations of several seed-eating birds, so reversion of remaining arable land may not be beneficial.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

ELS

OELS

HLS

SA

HOW CAN I BENEFIT BIRDS WITH ARABLE REVERSION?

Site selection

- It is important to have clear and appropriate objectives for a site and to ensure that the management required after reversion is feasible.
- Location, geology, drainage and soil type, pH and nutrient status are key factors determining the potential for recreating a particular habitat. A soil test is often vital. Low soil phosphorous is critical when trying to achieve botanical diversity.
- The most suitable areas for reversion are often on land that abuts existing habitat, as extending or linking important habitat helps plants and animals to colonise and can ease management, such as by increasing the grazing area.

Vegetation establishment

Natural regeneration

- Vegetation can be established through natural regeneration if there are still viable seeds of the desired plant community in the seed bank or where there is a good chance of seed dispersing naturally from adjacent habitats. It is the cheapest method of establishment, also guaranteeing the local provenance of the seed. However, results can be unpredictable.
- Allowing the field to germinate offers the opportunity to assess the soil's seed bank. If the establishing vegetation is unsuitable and there is little opportunity for suitable species to colonise, the field can be re-worked and seed sown.

Sowing

- Sowing a seed mixture is sometimes more appropriate, but obtaining seed of suitable provenance can be difficult for some habitats.
- A wide variety of seed mixtures can be purchased, ranging from those of agricultural cultivars to mixtures harvested from existing semi-natural habitats in the UK. The spreading of green un-wilted hay from nearby species-rich grassland is an alternative method of reseedling.
- Weed burdens need to be minimised before sowing. Repeated cultivation and/or spraying of weed growth before sowing will help.

Post establishment management

- Short periods of heavy grazing, preferably with sheep, during the first growing season will prevent a few plants dominating and help to suppress weeds.
- Perennial weeds will require attentive management through cutting, spot spraying or weed wiping in the early years.
- Reversion is a long-term commitment.

Specific habitat guidance

Lowland wet grassland

- When creating wet grassland from arable land it is important to establish a good soil structure before changing the water levels. A period of dry grassland management can resolve any soil compaction problems, establish a deep-rooted sward, and where necessary, raise soil organic matter through the application of farmyard manure.

- Ongoing management should aim to maintain a good soil structure by avoiding prolonged saturated conditions and ensuring soils are not too wet when using machinery or grazing.

Lowland heathland

- Soil pH should be below 5.5 and nutrients reduced to very low levels. Management to reduce fertility may be necessary.
- Vegetation will develop into acidic grassland as fertility declines.
- Heather can be introduced by harvesting seed from the neighbouring heathland.
- The aim is for a mosaic of heather, gorse, acidic grassland, scrub and bare ground.

Chalk grassland

- Chalk grassland species require dry, free-draining, thin soils over chalk. Ideally, soils will have a pH > 6.5 and a P index of 0 or 1.
- Vegetation will change with grazing and declining nutrient levels.

USING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

- **HLS** **ELS** **OELS** The ELS and OELS schemes fund reversion to protect archaeological features. The HLS can fund the creation of important habitats such as heathland, semi-natural grassland, wet grassland for breeding waders and wildfowl, and some scrub and woodland habitats. It can also fund reversion to prevent soil erosion or run-off.

PRIORITY ACTION

- Clear and appropriate objectives are essential.
- Seek advice to identify the most appropriate sites.
- Agri-environment schemes can fund reversion to meet specific objectives.

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:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB,
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk/farming



Farming and Wildlife Advisory
Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth,
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The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge,
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