Under Northern Ireland’s agri-environment schemes, the 1 metre strip from the edge of the field boundary must not be cultivated, sprayed or fertilised. Wider rough grass margins can be established for birds, mammals and over-wintering insects.

Grass margins boost numbers of beneficial insects and spiders on arable farmland

Tussocky grass margins provide over-wintering habitat for many beneficial insects and spiders that will feed on crop pests in the spring. Grass margins are also used by grasshoppers and other insects that provide chick food for birds.

Grass margins provide habitat for small mammals

Populations of small mammals, such as wood mice and pygmy shrews, are able to build up in grass margins, providing ideal hunting for barn owls and kestrels. Wide margins away from roadsides can reduce the risk of barn owls being killed by road traffic.

Grass margins can provide nest sites for ground-nesting birds

A tussocky grass strip against a short, thick hedge provides an ideal habitat for ground-nesting birds such as yellowhammers and whitethroats.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Less productive areas of arable fields can be turned into important wildlife habitats.
HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE ROUGH GRASS MARGINS?

**CMS/ESA Establishment**
- Create rough grass margins, 2 to 12 m wide, by sowing.
- Early autumn is the best time for establishment. Increase the seed rate if sowing a mix in spring.
- Native grass species are much better for wildlife than ryegrass. For tussocky rough grass margins, use 15% cocksfoot, Timothy grass or Yorkshire fog in the mix and make up the rest with finer grasses – see table of recommended grass species. Sow at a rate of 20 kg/ha.
- If problem weeds are present then treat with glyphosate before cultivation. Create a fine seedbed, broadcast or shallow-drill the seed and roll the margin for best results.
- Management to achieve good weed control is the priority in the first year. If spring sown, cut at least three times between 15 July and 30 September to top annual weeds and encourage perennial grasses to tiller. If autumn sown, an earlier cut may be needed.
- Rough grass margins should be sited next to a hedge, scrub, woodland or a watercourse for maximum wildlife benefit.

**CMS/ESA Existing field margins**
- Maintaining existing field margins is at least as important as creating new ones as they are likely to have built up a variety of native plants and insects over time.

**CMS/ESA Management of rough grass margins**
- After the first year, rough grass margins should not be cut more than once every three years, between 15 July and 30 September, to allow mature tussocks to develop and insect populations to build up. They should be cut on a rotation so that there are plenty of uncut margins every year. If possible, cut and remove or chop and spread the cuttings to avoid smothering the sward underneath.
- Regular traffic on the margins for access or storage will reduce the wildlife value, but one-off operations outside the nesting season, such as hedge-trimming, will have negligible effects.
- Do not apply fertiliser, manure or pesticides/herbicides. These can encourage weeds and remove beneficial plants and insects.
- Spot treat or weed-wipe thistles, docks or ragwort whenever they occur to prevent numbers building up.

**CMS/ESA = payments are available under the Countryside Management and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes**

**Recommended grasses for rough grass margins**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tussock forming grasses (15% of mix)</th>
<th>Finer grasses (85% of mix)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cocksfoot</td>
<td>Red fescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy grass</td>
<td>Sheep’s fescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire fog</td>
<td>Creeping fescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rough stalked meadow grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smooth meadow grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common bent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creeping bent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sweet vernal grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crested dog’s tail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meadow foxtail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A successfully established rough grass margin should be an effective barrier to weeds moving into the crop. If, however, there is a risk of weeds moving from the margin into the crop a 1 m sterile strip may be created between the grass margin and the crop. This can be maintained by cultivating or spraying, taking care to prevent any drift into the grass margin.

RSPB Northern Ireland, Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT
Tel: 028 9094 1547 or e-mail rspb.nireland@rspb.org.uk

DARD Countryside Management Branch
Lindsey Hall, Loughry Campus, Dungannon Rd, Cookstown, Co Tyrone BT80 9AA
Tel: 028 8675 7515 or e-mail cmbenquiries@dardni.gov.uk

See also the RSPB/DARD advisory sheets on:
- Yellowhammer
- Conservation cereal
- Wild bird cover

Printed on environmentally-friendly paper RSPB regd charity no 207076 223-0763-06-07