



for birds
for people
for ever



FARMING FOR WILDLIFE IN NORTHERN IRELAND
Wild bird cover



Peter Thompson (RSPB)

Wild bird cover provides an alternative source of food for seed-eating birds now that weedy stubbles and spilt grain are less available.

Wild bird cover is a spring-sown crop mixture which is left unharvested over winter to provide food for seed-eating farmland birds. It is an alternative source of seed food for birds where the traditional sources, such as weedy stubbles and spilt grain, have become less available due to changes in farming. Wild bird cover can be funded through agri-environment schemes. Further information is available from DARD's Countryside Management Branch.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Seed-bearing crops provide food for birds throughout the winter

A mix of seed crops will provide food for a wide range of seed-eating birds. A two-year crop can also provide seed in spring of the second year, which may help birds get into breeding condition.

Cereal-based mixtures provide good habitat for yellowhammers

The yellowhammer is a seed-eating farmland bird which has

undergone a severe decline in Northern Ireland. Growing a cereal-based mixture each year will provide grain, a staple of the yellowhammer diet.

Flowering plants attract nectar-feeding insects

Flowering plants, for example kale, mustard, phacelia and linseed, will encourage nectar-feeding insects. Many of these insects will then lay eggs nearby and so increase the numbers of insect larvae available to birds as food. In turn, the larvae of some

nectar-feeding insects prey on aphids, helping to reduce numbers of these pests in nearby crops.

Growing wild bird cover can help rare arable plants

Some arable plants, such as purple ramping fumitory, have become rare as arable cropping has declined and remaining arable production has become more intensive. Growing wild bird cover with low nitrogen inputs can help to conserve rare arable plants.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE WILD BIRD COVER?

- Wild bird cover should be grown only on land capable of growing an arable crop. Poorly drained areas, land prone to weed problems and existing wildlife habitats should be avoided.
- Blocks of around 1 hectare in size are ideal.
- Crops beside bushy hedges, areas of scrub or trees will attract the greatest range of birds. Good crops for different species and where best to situate them are given in Table 1.
- Decide whether to grow a one-year or two-year crop. Mixtures containing kale will last two years but require a higher standard of management. In areas with yellowhammers, one-year crops are preferable.
- Use a mix of at least two crops listed in Table 2. Include cereal and an oil-rich seed (eg linseed, kale, oilseed rape, mustard or quinoa) in the mixture. The sowing rate given is for drilled seed, increase by one third to a half if broadcasting.
- Sow the crop in spring, before the end of May. Most crops may be sown from mid-March, but if kale or quinoa are included in the mixture wait until the risk of frost or cold weather has passed before sowing.
- Prepare a fine, firm seedbed. Weeds should be controlled during seedbed preparation, as herbicide cannot be used once the crop has been sown.
- Cereals are best drilled. Other seeds are smaller so should be shallow-drilled.

Alternatively, smaller seeds may be broadcast immediately after drilling the cereal. Finish by rolling to ensure good seed/soil contact.

- Apply less fertiliser than would be used for a conventional arable crop.
- Re-establish one-year crops every spring. Crops containing kale may be retained for a

second year before re-establishing, provided they contain an adequate amount of kale. Rotation of crops containing kale, oilseed rape or mustard will help prevent the build up of clubroot.

- Wild bird cover must be protected from livestock.

Table 1. Preferred crop types of declining seed-eating birds

Bird	Seed preference	Preferred structure and location
Yellowhammer	Cereals	Next to hedge
Tree sparrow	Kale, cereals, quinoa, oilseed rape and weeds	Next to thick hedge, small woodland or scattered trees
Linnet	Kale, linseed, mustard and oilseed rape	Next to hedge or area of scrub
Reed bunting	Kale, quinoa, oilseed rape and weeds	Next to hedge, close to sheugh
Skylark	Linseed, kale and cereals	Open canopy such as sparse cereal away from boundaries

Table 2. Suggested seed rates

Divide the figure by the number of crops in the mix. For example, if growing a mix of cereal and linseed, the cereal rate will be 62 kg/ha and the linseed rate will be 30 kg/ha.

Seed Type	Seed rate (kg/ha)
Cereal	125
Linseed	60
Quinoa	10
Oilseed rape	7.5
Mustard	12
Kale	5

KEY POINTS

- Wild bird cover provides an important winter seed source for seed-eating farmland birds that have declined as farming has changed.
- Wild bird cover can be funded through agri-environment schemes. Contact DARD's Countryside Management Branch for details.
- To attract a wide range of birds:
 - Establish a crop of about 1 ha beside a bushy hedge;
 - Include cereal and an oil-rich seed (eg linseed, kale, oilseed rape or quinoa) in the mixture.

See also the RSPB/DARD advisory sheets on:

- Yellowhammer
- Rough grass margins
- Conservation cereal

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



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