



for birds
for people
for ever



FARMING FOR BIRDS

Grey partridge



Roger Wilmshurst (RSPB Images)

The grey partridge has a brick-red face, as opposed to the black-and-white pattern on the red-legged partridge.

The grey partridge can be found in most farming systems except predominantly improved grasslands. The UK grey partridge population fell by 82% between 1970 and 1998. This has been mainly caused by the loss of insect food sources on farmland. The loss of seed sources, loss of nesting habitat and predation have also contributed.*

*Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

WHAT DO GREY PARTRIDGES NEED?

Insects to feed to chicks in the spring and summer

Grey partridge chicks feed on insects, especially caterpillars, beetles, bugs, ants and aphids. Breeding is more successful when there is plenty of this food available. Chicks take insects mainly from crop margins.

Lots of seeds throughout the year

Adult grey partridges feed mainly on seeds and shoots throughout the year. They seek places where they can find lots of seed food. Such areas include rotational set-aside, winter stubbles, harvested root crops, newly-sown crops and weeds in the crop margins.

Safe nesting cover

Grey partridges nest on the ground in hedge bottoms, grass margins, beetle banks, cereals, game cover and nettle beds. Dead tussocky grass left over from the previous year is particularly attractive as nesting cover.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE GREY PARTRIDGES?

ON SET-ASIDE

- You can provide seed food throughout the winter at a low cost with a one-acre plot of wild bird cover. Establish a seed-rich crop in the spring and maintain it for two years. Kale and quinoa are particularly useful components in the mix.
- You can also establish brood-rearing cover in the autumn. Use a mix of a cereal and a brassica – such as mustard – or linseed, and up to 5% red clover to attract insects. Establishing this adjacent to a tussocky grass margin creates an insect-rich chick feeding area. Maintain this for two years to provide seed in the second winter.
- The natural regeneration of rotational set-aside provides more seed food over winter than non-rotational set-aside.
- If possible, delay the use of a broad-spectrum herbicide until July. This will provide important feeding and nesting habitat in the spring. Alternatively, 20 metre strips of non-rotational set-aside can provide nesting habitat. Cut on or just before 15 August and make use of the option to leave 25% uncut for up to three years.

ON ARABLE LAND

- Only use pesticides when the infestation exceeds the economic threshold. Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March. These remove beneficial insects and spiders that move into the crops in the spring. The loss of this food source is particularly damaging to grey partridges.
- Adopt conservation headlands. Avoid spraying the outer six metres of cereal fields with non-selective insecticides or herbicides. This enables beneficial insects and chick food for grey partridges to survive. You can get agronomic advice from the Game Conservancy Trust.
- Spray and cultivate stubbles as late as possible as they provide important winter feeding habitat.
- The rotational set-aside options described above are very important on farms where overwinter stubbles are not a viable option.
- Create grass margins around arable fields as nesting habitat for grey partridges. Include species such as cocksfoot in the seed mix to create tussocks. After the margins are established, cut only in the autumn once every three years. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year.

- Use beetle banks in fields greater than 20 hectares to provide nesting cover and overwintering habitat for beneficial insects. Beetle banks are two-metre grass strips through the middle of arable fields. Such fields can be managed as one unit, as the headland is still cropped.

ON GRASSLAND

- Growing spring-sown arable fodder crops or small plots of wild bird cover will benefit grey partridges in areas that are largely agricultural grassland. The crop and following stubble both provide abundant seed food.
- Undersown cereal crops will provide seed food through the winter. The lack of cultivation in the autumn as well as restrictions on herbicide use will produce an abundant supply of insects.
- Fence off margins of up to six metres around improved grass fields and leave these unfertilised, uncut and ungrazed. Graze or cut in September every two to three years. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year. Select margins that are adjacent to short thick hedges (less than two metres).

Many of these guidelines may be funded by agri-environment schemes. In England, new arable options to benefit grey partridges can be funded by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme from 2002. You can get further information on these 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



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 024 7669 6699



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF. Tel: 01425 652381

PRIORITY ACTION

Provide sufficient insect food for chicks in crops and field margins.

USE OF INSECTICIDE

Following these guidelines on insecticide use will help beneficial insects as well as grey partridges.

FIELD MARGIN MANAGEMENT

These guidelines:

- can benefit grey partridges
- can help with pest control in the crop by harbouring beneficial insects overwinter
- can help with weed control in the crop margin by forming a barrier to weeds in the hedge base.



Sponsored by

