



for birds  
for people  
for ever

# FARMING FOR BIRDS

# Skylark



Chris Gomersall (RSPB Images)

This brown farmland bird has a distinct crest. It is best known for its loud, continuous warbling song performed high in the air.

*The skylark can be found on all farm types. Densities are highest on lowland arable and mixed farming systems. The UK skylark population fell by 52% between 1970 and 1998\*. This decline was caused by the move from spring to winter cereals, as well as intensified grassland management.*

\*Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

## WHAT DO SKYLARKS NEED?

### Mid-field areas in which to nest and feed

Skylarks occupy the open fields to avoid predators. They cannot be conserved by measures taken within 10 metres of the field boundary.

### Seeds and weeds throughout the year

Adults feed on leaves and seeds of crops and weeds. Their association with weedy stubbles in winter shows they prefer seeds and weed leaves.

### Nesting habitat to produce up to three broods every year

Skylarks nest on the ground, in vegetation that is 20–50 centimetres high. This vegetation must be open enough to give the birds easy access to the ground. They need to make two or three nesting attempts between April and August to sustain the population. Crops such as winter wheat generally grow too tall and thick to enable more than a single brood. Silage

fields attract skylarks, but are generally cut too frequently to allow successful breeding.

### Insects and spiders in the spring and summer

Skylark chicks are fed exclusively on insects and spiders for the first week of life. These are also an important part of the diet of adults from April until August. Insects are collected from crops, set-aside and pasture.

## GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SKYLARKS?

### ON SET-ASIDE

- Use a mix of natural regeneration on rotational set-aside for seed food and grass cover on non-rotational set-aside for nesting habitat.
- Delay the use of broad-spectrum herbicide on rotational set-aside until July to provide important feeding and nesting habitat for skylarks in the spring. However, spraying is preferable to cutting or cultivating.
- You can create nesting cover by putting a low yielding field or a 20 metre strip through the middle of a large field into non-rotational set-aside. Establish a green cover by natural regeneration or sowing a native grass mix. Cut on or just before 15 August. Make use of the option to leave 25% uncut on a rotational basis around the set-aside area.

### ON ARABLE LAND

- Include spring cereals or a spring break crop (other than oilseed rape, which grows too quickly) in the rotation, where viable. This will provide ideal nesting habitat.
- Weedy stubbles are the most beneficial winter feeding habitat for skylarks on the arable farm. Even sprayed stubbles generally provide more food

than cultivated ground or autumn-sown crops. Can you delay cultivation of stubbles going into a spring crop until February or March?

- Natural regeneration on rotational set-aside is very important on farms where overwinter stubbles are not a viable option.
- 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

- Skylarks can nest in silage fields. However, these nests are only successful if the field is not cut or grazed between early April and the end of May. Subsequent cuts must be at least six weeks apart.
- It may be more practical to return an unproductive, sparse grass ley to hay meadow management. This could provide a safer nesting habitat.
- Introduce arable fodder crops (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in pastoral areas.

- Skylarks can nest in grazed pasture if you can maintain a tussocky sward with a low stock rate through the spring and summer.

## PRIORITY ACTION

Provide suitable nesting habitat using set-aside, spring cereals or hay.

## GOOD SET-ASIDE MANAGEMENT

- A cheap and easy way to help skylarks on arable land
- Select fields with the lowest yields to create nesting habitat on non-rotational set-aside.



Many of these guidelines may be funded by agri-environment schemes. 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

Sponsored by

