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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

# Non-rotational set-aside



Nick Milton (RSPB Images)

Twenty-metre strips can be created using natural regeneration or sowing a mix of native plants

*Non-rotational set-aside can provide food and a safe nesting habitat for ground-nesting birds throughout the nesting season, as there is no urgency to manage the land to prepare the ground at this time for a following crop. However, rotational set-aside offers an abundance of annual plant seeds, and so is more useful for seed-eating birds throughout the winter. Mixing rotational and non-rotational set-aside can provide the maximum benefit for wildlife.*

## BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

### Field margin strips can boost numbers of insects, seeds and nesting sites

20-metre strips around field margins provide partridges, yellowhammers, reed buntings and corn buntings with nesting habitat. These also provide grass seed in the summer for seed-eating birds and an abundance of insect food for chicks. The width can be reduced to 10 metres if they run alongside a watercourse.

### Strips through the middle of large fields are particularly useful for skylarks

A 20-metre strip through the middle of a field may attract nesting skylarks. Partridges may also prefer these areas to field margins where the risk of predation is higher.

### Grass strips provide habitat for small mammals

Small mammal populations can build up in long-standing grass strips, creating an ideal hunting habitat for barn owls and kestrels. Wide margins away from roadsides can reduce the risk of barn owls being killed by road traffic.

### The wild bird cover option can be used to provide seeds for birds

Areas of non-rotational set-aside can be used to establish a seed-rich mixture of at least two different crop types for seed-eating birds (see the separate sheet entitled 'Wild bird cover (or wildlife mixtures)' for further details).

### Set-aside can distract wintering geese from crops

In areas attracting large numbers of wintering geese, use the management plan option of multi-annual set-aside to attract feeding geese away from cereals and other crops.

### Cultivated plots for nesting lapwings or rare arable plants can be created on set-aside

In areas that are used by breeding lapwings, or hold rare arable plants, use the management plan option of multi-annual set-aside to cultivate areas for them.

## HOW CAN I SITE AND MANAGE NON-ROTATIONAL SET-ASIDE?

### WHERE TO SITE IT

- On most arable farms, there are areas where the net income from cropping the land will be less than the set-aside area payment. Such areas are ideal locations for non-rotational set-aside. They may be whole fields, field margin strips or areas in the middle of fields. All can be managed for the benefit of wildlife.
- Mid-field areas are particularly useful for skylarks as they tend to avoid field margins, especially if there is a hedge or other tall boundary feature present.
- Set-aside managed for feeding geese or nesting lapwings should be located in a field likely to attract them (see below).

### MANAGEMENT

- Green cover can be established by natural regeneration or sowing. When sowing green cover, use a mix of native perennial grasses. A seed mix containing tussock-forming grasses (eg cocksfoot and Timothy) and fine grasses (eg fescues and bents) will form a more varied sward.
- Wild flower seed can be incorporated into the mix to attract nectar-feeding insects, but this will make the mix more expensive. If you decide to do this, choose native flowers such as scabious, knapweed and yarrow, which can survive in a tall grass sward. Drill at a low seed rate to allow some natural regeneration to occur, as this will increase the diversity of the sward.
- Most non-rotational set-aside has to be mown between 15 July and 15 August. Cut just before 15 August to protect late-nesting skylarks or corn buntings.

- Up to 25% of each non-rotational set-aside area can be left uncut. It is best to rotate this 25% around the set-aside area annually. Alternatively, the same area can be left uncut for up to three years; 2-metre margins can be left uncut for as long as the field is in set-aside. Use this option around arable fields with thin hedgerows to allow these to widen out. It is possible to get a derogation from the set-aside rules to leave larger areas uncut if there is an environmental reason for doing so (for more information, contact one of the advisory bodies listed below).
- Grazing is permitted between 1 September and 14 January. Grazing livestock can create a more varied vegetation structure and composition, and enhance the abundance of invertebrates in a field.
- If persistent weeds like dock, thistles and ragwort flourish then you may need to either spot-spray with a knapsack sprayer, or use a weed-wiper to avoid damaging the rest of the sward.
- Use whole fields of 10 hectares or more, and allow 15–30 hectares for every 1,000 geese. Two or three separate parcels of land are better than a single block as geese can move between sites if disturbed.
- Sow a mix of perennial ryegrass, Timothy and white clover at a ratio of 5:1:1 with 5% of fescues at a total seed rate of 30 kilograms per hectare.
- Graze or cut the sward to a height of 5 cm in September (removing the cuttings if possible).

### CULTIVATED PLOTS FOR NESTING LAPWINGS AND RARE ARABLE PLANTS

- Annual cultivation of headlands where rare arable plants occur is possible under the management plan option of multi-annual set-aside.
- Where set-aside is likely to attract breeding lapwings, then a management plan can be drawn up using multi-annual set-aside to enable you to plough and disc 2 hectares or more in February (or you could plough in the autumn to weather down through the winter).
- Select a field that is used regularly by breeding lapwings. If previous breeding sites are not known, then choose a large arable field adjacent to a permanent pasture field that will be grazed throughout the spring.
- Avoid locating a plot close to a tall hedge or a wood.
- Avoid cutting or cultivating the plot between mid-March and mid-July.
- Repeat this management annually.

### MANAGING SET-ASIDE FOR OVER-WINTERING WILDFOWL AND GEESE

- An improved grass sward can attract wintering geese away from cereals and other crops. Geese will select swards that receive fertiliser applications or contain clover in the mix. Such conditions will require a management plan using multi-annual set-aside.
- The set-aside should be sited on land that has previously been used by geese, within 10 km of a known roost and not on land that already has wildlife interest.

Multi-annual set-aside can be used to undertake much of this management. 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



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

## KEY POINTS

Those arable areas with the lowest yield can be put into non-rotational set-aside and managed for wildlife.

You can leave up to 25% of each set-aside area uncut each year to benefit nesting birds.

Draw up a management plan under the multi-annual set-aside scheme to create specific habitat for wintering geese, breeding lapwings or rare arable plants.

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