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# Rotational set-aside



Peter Thompson (GCT)

**Rotational set-aside is a particularly useful source of seeds and grain for birds of open farmland**

*Natural regeneration of rotational set-aside provides a weedy stubble that offers good habitat for many seed-eating birds, arable plants and overwintering insects. This is a particularly important habitat on those arable farms that no longer have winter stubbles, but is a beneficial habitat for birds on any arable farm.*

## **BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

### **Rotational set-aside provides important winter food and breeding habitats for birds and brown hares**

Rotational set-aside provides food for seed-eating birds throughout the winter and habitat for ground-nesting birds in spring. It is also an important habitat for the brown hare.

### **Rotational set-aside increases insect numbers**

Rotational set-aside is often home to an abundance of insects, which are attracted by the annual plants that grow there. Insects that pupate in the soil over the winter, such as sawflies, benefit from the lack of cultivation. As many farmland birds feed their chicks on invertebrates, this provides an important food resource in the spring.

### **A nesting plot for lapwings can be created on set-aside**

In areas that are used by breeding lapwings, a derogation from the set-aside rules can be sought to cultivate a nesting plot.

## **GUIDELINES OVERLEAF**

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

### WHERE TO SITE ROTATIONAL SET-ASIDE

- Rotational set-aside is best managed on a whole-field basis as hedgerow species, such as tree sparrows and yellowhammers, are likely to make use of the food supply within 10 metres of the hedge, while skylarks are more likely to nest and feed in the middle of the field, away from any hedges.

### MANAGEMENT

- Generally, allowing natural regeneration after the harvest provides an ideal seed source for birds throughout the winter. Rotational set-aside will continue to be beneficial for birds until the point where management is needed.
- Spraying is preferable to cutting or cultivation between April and August as this does not destroy nests. However, nesting cover and food resources will decline within two weeks of spraying.
- If the vegetation is largely broad-leaved weeds and volunteer cereals then weed control is not as crucial and the vegetation can be left until late July, when most ground-nesting birds will have finished nesting.
- If grass weeds dominate, then you can delay spraying until the start of

seeding to achieve optimum control. In southern England, this is likely to be the end of May for blackgrass and barren brome, early June for wild oats, and July for couch grass. Timings will be later further north.

- You should, however, consider leaving headlands unsprayed to benefit the majority of wildlife species using the field.
- Delay cultivation of set-aside for as long as possible as skylarks and corn buntings can have chicks in the nest until mid-August.

### ALTERNATIVE NESTING HABITATS

- If you think that early use of broad-spectrum herbicides is likely to be necessary, then try to have additional areas of non-rotational set-aside on the farm to provide unmanaged habitat into August for ground-nesting birds (see the separate sheet entitled 'Non-rotational set-aside').

### NESTING PLOTS FOR LAPWINGS

- Where set-aside is likely to attract breeding lapwings, then a derogation from the set-aside rules should be sought 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.
- Rotational set-aside can be used to create plots at different locations around the farm. If successful, then it is useful to keep the plot in the same place each year.

## KEY POINTS

Natural regeneration is an easy way of providing winter food for seed-eating birds.

Rotational set-aside is particularly important on arable farms that no longer include winter stubbles in the rotation.

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

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