



for birds
for people
for ever



FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Wild bird cover (or wildlife mixtures)



Peter Thompson (GCT)

These strips can provide the best seed source for birds on the farm

This approach offers an important opportunity to create a crop that will feed seed-eating birds in areas where traditional food sources, such as weedy stubbles, spilt grain and cereals fed to outdoor stock, are no longer available. Wild bird cover can be created on set-aside, or funded under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (where it is referred to as 'wildlife mixtures'). The latter is only available where it is likely to benefit key farmland birds, arable plants and insects. Different rules apply to the creation of wild bird cover on set-aside and wildlife mixtures under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, and you should check the latest DEFRA literature or seek advice to ensure that your management meets the relevant requirements.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Seed-bearing crops provide food for birds throughout the winter

The use of a mix of seed crops will lead to the creation of an attractive feeding habitat for a wide range of seed-eating birds. A two-year crop will also provide seed throughout the spring of the second year and this may help birds to attain breeding condition.

Flowering plants attract nectar- and pollen-feeding insects

Any flowering crops, especially legumes or phacelia, will encourage nectar- and pollen-feeding insects. Many of these insects will then lay eggs in the vicinity and thus increase the numbers of insect larvae available to birds as food. Hoverflies are especially attracted to these strips and will lay eggs wherever there is an abundance of aphids for their larvae to feed on, thus helping to reduce numbers of these pests in adjacent crops.

Mixes including cereals provide good brood-rearing cover for grey partridges

A mix with a high proportion of cereals established in the spring or autumn will create an open, invertebrate-rich crop that is an ideal foraging environment for grey partridge chicks

[GUIDELINES OVERLEAF](#)

HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE WILD BIRD COVER (OR WILDLIFE MIXTURES)?

PREPARATION AND MANAGEMENT

- To comply with set-aside rules, the plots should be at least 0.3 hectares in size and should contain at least two different crop types throughout their life. Several smaller plots are better than one large area in terms of providing food for birds throughout the farm.
- The seedbed should be prepared and the crop drilled as for a commercial arable crop.
- Sowing a cereal mix and broadcasting the other crops before rolling should achieve good establishment.
- Current set-aside rules stipulate that a maximum of 30 kilograms N (nitrogen) per hectare can be applied.
- As with all crops, wild bird cover is susceptible to competition from weeds, and attack by pests and diseases during establishment. Insects and weed seeds are important components of the diet of farmland birds, so the use of insecticides and herbicides should be kept to a minimum. Any use of insecticides and most herbicides will require authorisation from DEFRA.
- You may need to relocate plots if disease levels (eg of brassica club root) prevent establishment.

A CROP FOR SEED-EATING BIRDS

- Site the plots next to thick hedgerows for safe cover.
- Establish a mix in April or May and maintain this for two years. Kale (which seeds in the second year), a cereal and quinoa are particularly important components. In northern areas, it is important to use a winter-hardy variety of kale. On set-aside, it is useful to add another biennial plant, such as teasel or parsnip, to ensure that the plot holds two crop types in the second year. Crops such as mustard, forage rape, linseed and millet can also be included.
- After two years, destroy the cover in late March or early April and re-establish the mix as soon as possible.
- If first-year crops are sown next to second-year crops there will be seed available in the spring every year.

A POLLEN AND NECTAR CROP FOR INSECTS

- Incorporating flowering plants will boost the number of pollen and nectar-feeding insects such as bumblebees.
- Establishment of pollen and nectar mixtures is an option under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

These should include at least four flowering plants and four grasses. Once established, plots should be cut annually in the autumn. Re-establishment is only necessary if the flowering components are lost from the mix.

A BROOD-REARING COVER FOR GREY PARTRIDGES

- You should aim to create a 20-metre strip alongside a tussocky grass margin where partridges are likely to nest.
- The seed rate should be low to create an open habitat that gives birds access to the ground and low-growing weeds (eg a mix of 60 kilograms cereal and 6 kilograms mustard or rape per hectare).
- Establish in the spring or autumn each year.
- This can be carried out under the wild bird cover option on set-aside.

KEY POINTS

Wild bird cover can be created on set-aside or included in a Countryside Stewardship Scheme application. The latter is available where it can benefit rare arable plants and insects, or grey partridges, turtle doves, corn buntings or tree sparrows.

Check the latest set-aside rules or scheme guidelines to ensure that your management meets the relevant requirements.

Payment for some of this management may be available as part of a wider package of work under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. 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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Contact DEFRA for information and application packs for agri-environment schemes:
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