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THE GAME
CONSERVANCY
TRUST

FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Wild bird seed mixtures

ELS

OELS

HLS

SA



Peter Thompson (GCT)

These crops can provide the best seed source for birds on the farm.

Wild bird seed mixtures provide vital food for seed-eating birds throughout winter. They are particularly important in areas where traditional food sources, such as weedy stubble and cereals fed to outdoor stock, are no longer available. The seed mixtures can be funded by Entry Level Stewardship (ELS), Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). Entry Level Stewardship includes an option to create them on set-aside, or they can be located on set-aside outside of any scheme. Different rules apply to the various options, and you should check the latest Defra literature or seek advice to ensure 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 may also provide seed in spring of the second year and this may help birds to attain breeding condition.

Crops managed without broad-spectrum herbicides and with low nitrogen inputs can conserve rare arable plant populations

The weed flora within wild bird seed mixtures may contain rare arable plants that can be conserved if use of herbicides and fertilisers is carefully considered.

Flowering plants attract nectar-feeding insects

Any flowering crops or weeds will encourage nectar-feeding insects. Many of these insects will then lay eggs nearby and thus increase the numbers of insect larvae available to birds as food. Hoverflies are especially attracted to the flowering plant 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 nearby crops.

Cereal-based mixes provide good brood-rearing cover for grey partridges

A cereal-based mix established in 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 SEED MIXTURES?

PREPARATION AND MANAGEMENT

- Wild bird seed mixtures are generally established in spring. Where spring sowing is not possible then autumn sowing of an annual mix on a two-year rotation provides seed in the second winter only, in which case, adjacent strips will need to be created in alternate years to provide seed every winter.
- Use a mix of at least three small-seed bearing crops. Good crops for different species are listed in Table 1. Maize and sorghum are not useful components, and do not qualify as small-seed bearing crops in mixtures for ELS. The crops can be drilled in separate rows unless you are using set-aside. This may be useful in terms of allowing a rotation to avoid the build up of soil-borne diseases.
- Create blocks of up to 0.5 ha in size. Aim for between two and five blocks per 100 ha to provide plenty of seed food around the farm.
- March to May is the best period for spring establishment. Cereals do better in earlier crops, but later sowing is better for quinoa, which is prone to late frosts.
- The seedbed should be prepared and the crop drilled as for a commercial arable crop. Recommended seed rates are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Suggested seed rates for crops. If part of a mixture then divide the figure by the number of crops in the mix

Crop	Seed rate kg / ha
Kale	5
Cereal	125
Quinoa	10
Linseed	60
Rape	7.5

- Sowing a cereal mix and broadcasting the other crops before rolling should achieve good establishment.
- Crops vary in their need for nitrogen fertiliser. In general, kale is the most demanding crop and should receive 70-100 kg N/ha. There is an application limit of 30 kg N/ha on set-aside.
- Pesticide use is restricted to the use of contact non-residual herbicides prior to sowing, spot treatment or weed-wipe of pernicious or alien species, and seed-treatments to control seedling pests and diseases.

Table 1. Preferred crop types of declining seed-eating birds (from the Game Conservancy Trust)

Species	Seed preference (in order)	Preferred structure and location
Grey partridge	Cereals, kale, rape, weeds	Thick canopy such as kale in open locations
Skylark	Linseed, millet, kale, cereals	Open canopy such as sparse cereal away from boundary features
Tree sparrow	Wide range, especially kale, cereals, quinoa, rape, millet and weeds	Next to thick hedge, small woodland or scattered trees
Linnet	Kale, linseed, mustard and rape	Next to hedge or area of scrub
Yellowhammer	Cereals and millet	Next to hedge
Reed bunting	Very wide range of small seeds eg kale, millet, quinoa, rape and weeds	Next to hedge, close to ditch
Corn bunting	Quinoa and cereals	Away from boundary features other than grass strips

- Plots of annual crops should be re-established every spring. Mixtures including kale should be re-established every other spring. Plots may be relocated within the same field to prevent the build-up of diseases such as brassica clubroot.
- Wild bird seed mixtures may be particularly useful for seed-eating birds on livestock farms with little or no arable farmland. Plots will need to be protected from grazing by locating them in corners of ungrazed silage fields or existing arable fields, or fenced off from grazing stock on pastures.

A BROOD-REARING COVER FOR GREY PARTRIDGES

- You should aim to create a 6 m wide strip (or 10 m if using set-aside and not next to a hedge or watercourse) 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 25 kg cereal and 2.5 kg mix of mustard and rape per hectare).
- Establish in spring or autumn each year.
- This can be carried out under the wild bird cover option on set-aside.

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
www.rspb.org.uk/farming



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



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF. Tel: 01425 652381
www.gct.org.uk

KEY POINTS

Wild bird seed mixtures may be particularly important on livestock farms where other seed sources are not available.

Aim for two to five blocks per 100 ha. Each block should be up to 0.5 ha in size.

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

A mix including a cereal and an oil-rich crop (eg kale, linseed or quinoa) will benefit the widest range of species.

The Defra ELS, OELS and HLS schemes can fund this type of management. For full details, refer to the scheme handbooks.

This habitat can be created on set-aside and still score points in the ELS scheme.

ELS = Entry Level Stewardship

OELS = Organic Entry Level Stewardship

HLS = Higher Level Stewardship

SA = Set-aside