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FARMING AND CROFTING FOR WILDLIFE

Silage and hay management



Above: The management of silage and hay fields determines the availability of important nesting and feeding habitat in the countryside.

The switch from hay to silage has been one of the most significant changes in agriculture over the last century. While helping to ensure the availability of good quality winter forage for livestock, it has allowed changes in grassland management that have reduced wildlife interest. Although traditional hay fields may have the greatest wildlife value, modifications in the management of agriculturally improved fields can also benefit birds.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Silage and hay fields can provide nesting habitat for a number of birds

Ground-nesting birds that require cover, such as the curlew, skylark, corncrake and corn bunting, can nest in silage and hay fields. Fields with wet flushes may attract snipe and redshanks.

Silage and hay fields can provide food for seed-eating birds

Shutting fields up from grazing livestock can allow broad-leaved plants in the sward to flower and seed, providing summer food for seed-eaters like the linnet, and nectar and pollen for insects.

Unimproved hay fields hold a rare community of plants

Hay fields that are the product of traditional, low intensity farming support a rich variety of grasses and flowers. Such fields are now a rare and invaluable habitat.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I MANAGE HAY AND SILAGE FIELDS TO BENEFIT WILDLIFE?

Nesting habitat

- Ground-nesting birds that require cover are attracted to fields shut up for hay or silage. They then need a certain period to complete incubation and for chicks to be able to be moved out of the field before mowing. The length of time birds require from stock removal to mowing will vary depending on species and how quickly birds start nesting. For example, skylarks are likely to require at least seven weeks between stock removal and mowing.
- In fields where waders (snipe, lapwings, redshanks, curlews) breed, leave damp hollows/corners uncut as unfledged chicks are most likely to use these areas.
- Ground-nesting birds are most commonly found in hay fields as the grassland management generally results in vegetation that is less dense and cut at a more mature stage. Silage or haylage may also be used, but timing of cutting is critical as the early and repeated cutting that takes place in many silage fields is more likely to destroy eggs and chicks. Species such as corncrake and corn bunting particularly benefit from late cutting (see RSPB advisory sheets for more information).
- If mowing a field when fledglings are likely to be present, cut in a 'bird friendly' way to enable chicks to escape the mower.
- Mechanical operations such as muck spreading, harrowing and rolling are often associated with hay and silage management.

Wherever possible, they should be timed before or after the breeding season in fields with ground-nesting birds. The critical breeding period for different birds is detailed in RSPB species advisory sheets.

- When the timing of the grass harvest is spread out over the summer, different fields provide a succession of opportunities for nesting and feeding birds in the local landscape.

Feeding habitat

- Broad-leaved plants that flower and seed within fields provide summer food for seed-eating birds such as the linnet and twite. Traditional hay fields are particularly important, but fields do not have to have a great variety of plants to be of value. Dandelion and sorrel are native herbs that often remain in semi-improved grasslands, providing valuable summer seed food. The resulting livestock fodder can also provide winter food for sparrows, finches and buntings, particularly when fed outdoors. Herbicide use should be minimised to avoid killing these beneficial plants.
- Leaving uncut margins and corners in mown fields enhances the availability of seeds and nectar if broad-leaved plants are present, and can provide valuable habitat for insects and small mammals.
- Aftermath grazing benefits most bird species by improving access to their invertebrate and seed food.

Traditional hay fields

- Traditional hay fields have developed their special interest because of historical management. It is important that these long-established management practices continue. The sequence that fields were usually cut in determined whether early or late-flowering plants thrived. Some fields have traditionally been grazed in the spring, while others have not.
- Aftermath grazing is important in providing bare ground and dung areas that offer opportunities for the germination of seeds.
- The application of small quantities of farmyard manure is not a problem where there is a tradition of such management. Artificial fertilisers should not be used as herbs and less competitive grasses begin to disappear, even at the lowest application rates (25 kg N/ha).
- It can be very difficult to restore the flower-rich plant communities of traditional hay fields on agriculturally improved and semi-improved grassland. Suitable sites and management need to be carefully chosen, and advice should be sought.

KEY POINTS

- Timing of cutting is critical to ground-nesting birds.
- Grass fields can be an important source of food for seed-eating birds.
- Plants and other wildlife associated with traditional hay fields need long-established management practices to continue.

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

- Improved grassland
- Buffer strips on grassland
- Corn bunting
- Farms, crofts and corncrakes.

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries visit www.farmwildlife.info

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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