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FARMING AND CROFTING FOR WILDLIFE

Over-wintered stubble



Above: Spilt grain and weed seeds in stubble are vital food for seed-eating birds throughout winter.

Over-wintered stubble provides an important winter food source for seed-eating birds. Other winter seed sources, such as spilt grain and hay fed to out-wintered stock, are scarcer today and seed food availability is limiting the over-winter survival of many seed-eating birds. It is estimated that over-wintered stubble on at least 10% of arable land could help reverse the decline of some farmland birds.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Over-wintered stubble provides important seed food for birds

Spilt grain and the seeds of broad-leaved weeds are vital for the winter survival of birds such as tree sparrows, corn buntings and yellowhammers, and also benefit game birds, skylarks and finches. The arable weeds most beneficial to birds are generally not the highly competitive ones.

Following spring crops can provide nesting and feeding habitat for wildlife

Spring crops following over-wintered stubble can provide nesting habitat for lapwings (if established Feb – March) and skylarks. Spring crops with limited herbicide use are particularly useful feeding habitats for grey partridges, tree sparrows, linnets and buntings. Stubble followed by a spring crop is also an important habitat for brown hares.

Over-wintered stubble and spring crops provide habitat for some rare arable plants

Over-wintered stubble will allow some arable plants to set seed. The following spring crop will also benefit spring-germinating arable plants and, if herbicide use is limited, can provide good conditions for some rare arable plant species.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE OVER-WINTERED STUBBLE?

- Barley stubble generally attracts more birds than wheat stubble, and spring barley stubble is better than that of winter barley. Stubble of crops such as rape and linseed may also provide a rich source of seeds, especially if they are weedy.
- The stubble of undersown crops is less beneficial for seed-eating birds, as the grass crop will hide the seeds on the ground. However, undersown crops are good for insects such as sawflies, which are important food for grey partridge chicks.
- It is best to use whole fields, as hedgerow species, such as tree sparrows and yellowhammers, are likely to make use of the food supply within 10 m of the hedge, while skylarks are more likely to feed in the middle of the field, away from any hedges.

General management

- Birds will make use of the spilt grain and broad-leaved weed seeds within stubble that is left to regenerate naturally after harvest. The weed seed available will mostly come from weeds that germinated with the preceding crop. Limited herbicide use or conservation headlands in the preceding crop will enhance the benefit of the stubble for seed-eating birds.
- Different species prefer to feed in stubble of different height. Tall stubble provides cover from predators for game birds and skylarks. However, sparrows, finches and buntings prefer to feed in shorter stubble so they can see approaching predators and fly into nearby hedgerows for protection. If possible, a variety of stubble heights around the farm will provide benefits for the widest range of species.

Using Rural Development Contracts

- The 'Retention of Winter Stubbles' can be funded by Rural Development Contracts. This provides support to retain the stubbles from the harvest of spring or winter cereals, protein or oilseed crops to provide cover and seed for farmland birds.
- Areas in this management option must not be ploughed or cultivated before 1 March following harvest. The application of herbicides and insecticides requires written permission.

KEY POINTS

- Over-wintered stubble provides spilt grain and broad-leaved weed seeds, which are important food sources for seed-eating birds.
- If over-wintered stubble is left on at least 10% of the arable land, it can help to reverse the decline of some farmland birds.
- Limited herbicide use in the preceding crop will increase the value of the over-wintered stubble for wildlife.

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:

- Corn bunting
- Grey partridge
- Linnet
- Tree sparrow
- Yellowhammer.

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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Front cover picture by Andy Hay
(rspb-images.com)

The Royal Society for the Protection of
Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity:
England and Wales no 207076,
Scotland no SC037654
775-1503-07-08