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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Fallow plots for ground-nesting birds

HLS

SA



Chris Knights (rspb-images.com)

The ideal surface is a rough cultivation so birds can conceal themselves in small hollows but still see around them for approaching predators.

Lapwings and stone-curlews may nest in spring-sown arable crops, but these become unsuitable when the crop grows above the height of the sitting bird. The breeding season of these species can be extended by providing rough fallow plots in fields where they have nested in the past.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Fallow plots provide nesting habitat for lapwings and stone-curlews

Fallow plots created in the right locations are likely to attract nesting lapwings or stone-curlews (the latter are restricted to areas in East Anglia and southern England), reducing the risk of them failing in spring crops due to agricultural operations or crop growth. If managed correctly, they can continue to nest on the plots throughout the breeding season (lapwings only rear one brood per year, but stone-curlews can rear two and skylarks can rear at least three). Skylarks are also

likely to start nesting on plots when the natural regeneration reaches 20 cm in height.

Fallow plots can allow rare arable plant populations to flourish

Cultivated ground with no crop, pesticide or fertiliser inputs creates ideal conditions for arable plants, many of which have seriously declined in recent years. There are specific options in Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) to create fallow plots for rare arable plants (see also RSPB advisory sheet on uncropped cultivated margins), but they may also occur on plots managed

for ground-nesting birds.

Fallow plots may develop an open seed-rich habitat for seed-eating birds

If plots develop short vegetation made up of seeding broad-leaved plants that do not impede visibility for ground-nesting birds, then they should be left to provide a summer seed source for birds. This can be particularly important for turtle doves that feed on seeds throughout summer and need open vegetation with easy access to the seeds on the ground.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE FALLOW PLOTS?

WHERE TO CREATE FALLOW PLOTS

- The ideal location for a plot is on the exact site where other lapwings or stone-curlews have nested before. Otherwise, choose an open field (more than 5 ha, or more than 10 ha if bordered by woodland or tall hedges) within 2 km of an existing population.
- If possible, create the plot in an arable field next to a grazed pasture to provide ideal foraging habitat. Plots can be created in grazed pastures, but will need fencing. Do not create plots in unimproved or species-rich grassland.
- The plot can be at a fixed location, or rotated around arable fields. A fixed plot is better if it is successful, as birds are more likely to return in following years, and there is less risk of a heavy weed burden in the following crop. There is also a risk of wheat bulb fly in a cereal crop following a fallow plot.
- For stone-curlews in particular, it is better to site plots at least 1 km away from main roads.

MANAGING FALLOW PLOTS

- Plots should be at least 2 ha and at least 100 m wide.
- The plots should be ploughed and cultivated with tines or discs in February or early March to create a rough surface

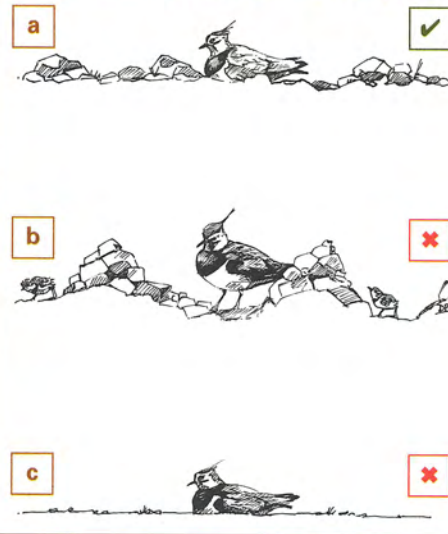
that provides enough cover for nesting birds to conceal themselves, but still enables them to see approaching predators. If spring cultivations are not possible then seek permission from your Rural Development Service adviser to plough in autumn and allow to weather down through winter.

- The plot should be left undisturbed from mid-March until the end of July (or the end of September for stone-curlews, which can rear two broods in a year).
- If the regeneration is dense and exceeds 10 cm high in early spring and no nesting birds are present, then consider spraying or re-cultivating to restore suitable nesting habitat. On such sites, it may be necessary to spray off vegetation prior to cultivating in subsequent years.

Creation of plots on set-aside

There is a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) option to create fallow plots for ground-nesting birds on set-aside. Alternatively, fallow plots can be created on set-aside and land not in agricultural production (GAEC 12) without Environmental Stewardship through a derogation from your local RPA office. Consult the RSPB or another conservation organisation for advice on seeking a derogation to help lapwings or stone-curlews.

The ideal surface for lapwings



- a) The ideal surface is a rough seedbed, such as one created by ploughing and discing in February or ploughing in autumn and allowing the surface to weather down.
- b) Do not create a surface that is too rough (eg by ploughing in February), so that birds and their young find it difficult to move around the plot
- c) Do not create a surface that is too flat (eg by rolling), so sitting birds are easily visible.

KEY POINTS

Higher Level Stewardship can fund the creation of fallow plots for nesting lapwings and stone-curlews.

Plots should be located on sites where birds have nested before, or in suitable locations close to an existing population.

The ideal surface is roughly cultivated, allowing sitting birds to see around them but enabling them to conceal themselves from predators.

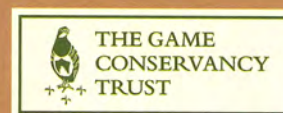
You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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

The Defra HLS scheme can fund this type of management. For full details, refer to the scheme handbook.

This habitat can be created on set-aside, either within HLS or without joining a scheme (for the latter, a derogation is required from your RPA office).

HLS = Higher Level Stewardship

SA = Set-aside

See also RSPB advisory sheets on:
Rotational set-aside
Non-rotational set-aside