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for people  
for ever



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

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. It can be provided on rotational set-aside, left preceding a spring crop or specifically managed under the new Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) or Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) schemes. 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.

### 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.

### Following spring crops can provide nesting and feeding habitat for birds and brown hares

Spring crops following the over-wintered stubble can provide nesting habitat for lapwings (if established in February or March) and skylarks. Spring crops managed with limited herbicide use are particularly useful feeding habitats for grey partridges, turtle doves, tree sparrows, linnets and buntings, and provide good conditions for some rare arable plants. Over-wintered stubble followed by a spring crop is also an important habitat for brown hares.

FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

# Over-wintered stubble

ELS

OELS

SA

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 ENTRY LEVEL STEWARDSHIP **ELS** **OELS**

- The ELS and OELS schemes fund management of stubble of combinable crops, but not maize. Under these schemes, you are not permitted to apply pre-harvest desiccants. You are not permitted to apply any pesticides, fertilisers, manure or lime to the stubble, or to top or graze it. A spring crop must follow the stubble.
- These schemes permit a light cultivation to encourage weed germination and loosen any surface compaction or capping before the end of September, or within the first month following harvest, if later. Otherwise, no cultivations are permitted. The benefit of this action for birds is that new seed sources may be brought to the surface by the cultivation. However, there is a risk that seeds currently on the surface are buried or germinate and are therefore no longer available to seed-eating birds. If the stubble holds many weeds and attracts flocks of seed-eating birds, then it is advisable to leave it uncultivated. If the stubble is very clean and no bird flocks are

seen, then a light cultivation with discs or fines in accordance with the scheme rules may improve it for birds.

### USING SET-ASIDE **SA**

- Natural regeneration on rotational set-aside can provide a seed source for birds throughout winter, and nesting and feeding habitat for some species until the point when the set-aside is sprayed off.
- A green cover has to be established by 15 January. It should be possible to achieve this by natural regeneration if no pre-harvest desiccants or post-harvest herbicides are used. Such weedy stubble is an ideal feeding area for seed-eating birds.
- Spraying is better than cutting or cultivating in summer, but is still best done as late as possible. Optimum control of weeds can be achieved by delaying spraying until the start of seeding of the target weeds. In southern England, this will be the end of May for black grass and barren brome, early June for wild oats, and July for couch grass. Timings will be later further north. If the vegetation is largely broad-leaved weeds and volunteer cereals then weed control is not as crucial and the vegetation can be left until late July, when most ground-nesting birds will have finished nesting.

## 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.

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](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 024 7669 6699  
[www.fwag.org.uk](http://www.fwag.org.uk)



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF. Tel: 01425 652381  
[www.gct.org.uk](http://www.gct.org.uk)

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

**ELS** = Entry Level Stewardship

**OELS** = Organic Entry Level Stewardship

**SA** = Set-aside

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:  
Low-input cereals  
Conservation headlands  
Rotational set-aside