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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Skylark plots

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Skylark plots are undrilled patches created by briefly switching off the drill when sowing winter cereals.

Skylark plots are undrilled patches in winter cereal fields. They have been proven to boost nesting opportunities for skylarks in areas of predominantly autumn-sown crops. If spring crops are not a main feature of your rotation, this is an important measure to conserve skylark numbers.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Skylark plots increase the number of chicks that skylarks can rear in winter cereals.

Winter cereal fields with skylark plots hold more nesting skylarks throughout the breeding season than conventional cereal fields, especially late in the season when numbers in conventional fields tail off as the crop becomes taller and thicker.

On average, nests in fields containing skylark plots produce more chicks than those in conventional fields. Skylark chicks that fledged in fields with skylark plots are also heavier, suggesting that they are better fed and more likely to survive the winter.

Skylarks do not generally nest in the skylark plots, but instead use them for foraging. In a conventional winter cereal field, skylarks can forage easily in April but, by June, more than half of the foraging has to take place outside the field. If adjacent fields also contain winter crops, skylarks will struggle to find sufficient food. However, in fields with two skylark plots per hectare, they continue to forage easily within the field throughout the season.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

CREATION OF SKYLARK PLOTS

It is best to create skylark plots in fields that are to be sown with winter cereals. The fields should be more than 5 ha in size and have an open aspect. Fields bounded by trees or adjacent woods are not suitable unless they are larger than 10 ha.

Skylark plots are created by switching off the drill (or lifting it up) to create undrilled patches at least 3 m wide. Aim for each plot to be between 16 m^2 and 24 m^2. The table below indicates the ideal length for plots created with different drill widths. A tail-off of cereal grain in the plot after the drill has been switched off or lifted up is to be expected.

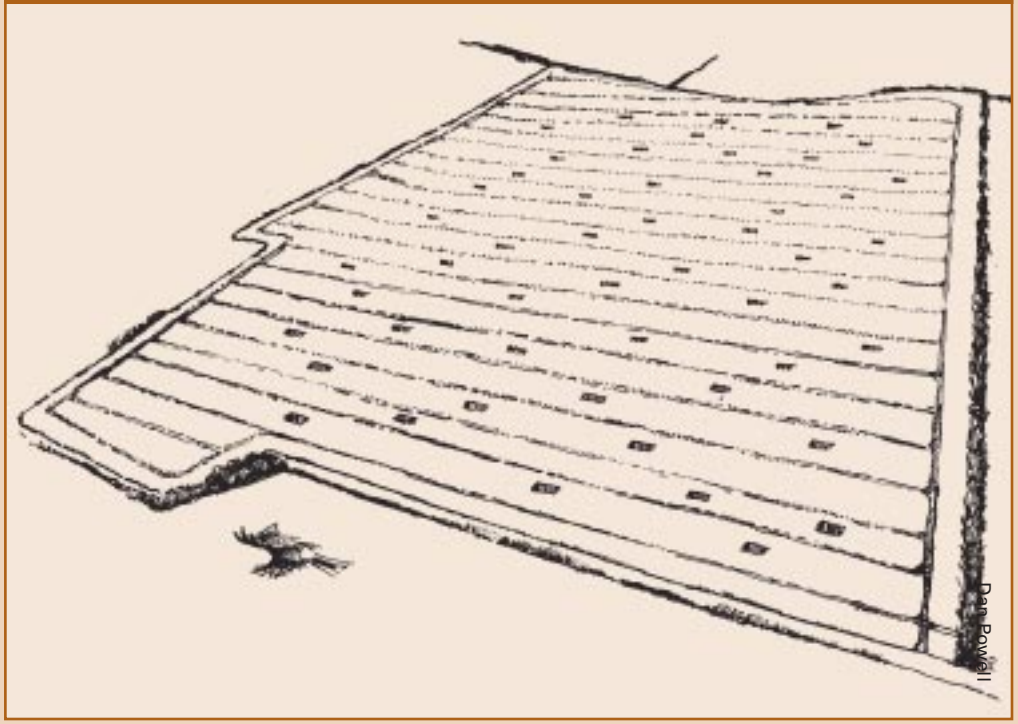
Guidance on the ideal plot length in relation to the width of the drill

Drill width (m)	Plot length (m)
3	6 to 8
4	4 to 6
6	3 to 4
8	3

The ideal number of plots in a field is two per hectare. They should not be connected to the tramlines and should be sited away from field boundaries and telegraph poles. They should be at least 24 m from the edge of the field. Typical plots of 4 x 5 m will take up less than half of 1% of the field area.

No further action is necessary – skylark plots will receive the same sprays and fertiliser applications as the rest of the field. If you have concerns about difficult weeds, such as black grass or wild oats, arising within the plot, you can control them using a knapsack sprayer – although this was rarely required in skylark plot trials.

A 25-hectare winter cereal field should ideally contain about 50 plots scattered across it. The plots should not be within 24 metres of the field edge or connected to the tramlines.



KEY POINTS

- Skylark plots are easily created by switching off the drill to create undrilled patches of at least 3 m in length.
- Fields with two skylark plots per hectare have been shown to have significant benefits for skylarks.
- Skylark plots are an option in the new Entry Level Scheme.

The Entry Level Scheme can fund the creation of skylark plots in England. You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:

www.saffie.info

THE GAME CONSERVANCY TRUST

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Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 02476 696699

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