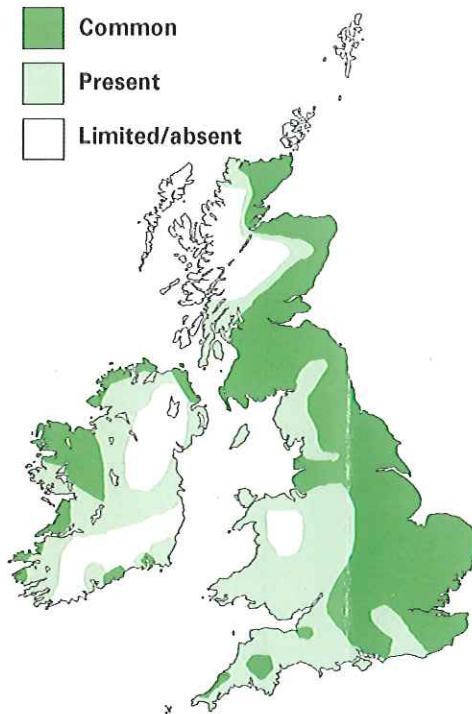




for birds
for people
for ever



Nigel Blake (rspb-images.com)

This brown farmland bird is best known for its loud, continuous warbling song, performed high in the air.

The skylark can be found on all types of farm. Densities are highest on lowland arable and mixed farming systems. The UK skylark population fell by 54% between 1970 and 2001. This decline was largely caused by the move from spring to winter cereals, as well as by intensified grassland management.*

*Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

WHAT DO SKYLARKS NEED?

Mid-field areas in which to nest and feed

Skylarks occupy open fields to avoid predators. They cannot be conserved by measures taken within 10 metres of the field boundary.

Seeds and weeds throughout the year

Adults feed on leaves and seeds of crops and weeds. Their strong association with weedy stubbles in winter shows the importance of seeds and weed leaves.

Nesting habitat to produce up to three broods every year

Skylarks nest on the ground, in vegetation that is 20–50 cm high. This vegetation must be open enough to give the birds easy access to the ground. They need to make two or three nesting attempts between April and August to sustain the population. Crops such as winter wheat generally grow too tall and thick to enable more than a single brood. Silage fields

attract skylarks, but are generally cut too frequently to allow successful breeding.

Insects and spiders in the spring and summer

Skylark chicks are fed exclusively on insects and spiders for the first week of life. These are also an important part of the diet of adults from April until August. Insects are collected from crops, set-aside and pasture.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SKYLARKS?

ON SET-ASIDE

- Use a mix of natural regeneration on rotational set-aside for seed food and grass cover on non-rotational set-aside for nesting habitat.
- Delay the use of broad-spectrum herbicide on **rotational set-aside** until July to provide important feeding and nesting habitat for skylarks in the spring. However, spraying is preferable to cutting or cultivating.
- You can create nesting cover by putting a low yielding field or a 20-metre strip through the middle of a large field into **non-rotational set-aside**. Establish a green cover by natural regeneration or sowing a native grass mix. Try to leave the annual cut as late as possible, and not before August to prolong the nesting season. Make use of the option to leave 25% uncut on a rotational basis around the set-aside area.

ON ARABLE LAND

- Include spring cereals or a spring break crop (other than oilseed rape, which grows too quickly) in the rotation, where viable. This will provide ideal nesting habitat.
- Create **skylark plots** (small undrilled patches) in winter cereals to boost

nesting success. Two plots per hectare (approximately 20 m² each) in fields larger than five hectares can boost productivity by almost 50%.

- Weedy **over-wintered stubbles** are the most beneficial winter-feeding habitat for skylarks on the arable farm. The best stubbles are cereal stubbles that receive no pre-harvest glyphosate and no post-harvest herbicides throughout the winter. Can you delay cultivation of stubbles going into a spring crop until February or March?
- Natural regeneration on rotational set-aside is very important on farms where an over-winter stubble preceding a spring crop is not a viable option.
- Use **beetle banks** in fields greater than 20 hectares to provide over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects. Beetle banks are two-metre grass strips through the middle of arable fields. Such fields can be managed as one unit, as the headland is still cropped.

ON GRASSLAND

- Skylarks can nest in silage fields. However, these nests are only successful if the field is not cut or grazed between early April and the end of May. Subsequent cuts must be

at least seven weeks apart to enable success for later nests.

- It may be more practical to return an unproductive, sparse grass ley to **hay meadow** management. This could provide a safer nesting habitat.
- Introduce **arable crops on livestock farms** (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in pastoral areas.
- Skylarks can nest in grazed pasture if you can maintain a tussocky sward with a low stock rate through the spring and summer. Unimproved grasslands managed without inputs often hold high densities of skylarks.

Bold text indicates habitat features for which specific advisory sheets are available from the RSPB or advice is available at: www.rspb.org.uk/farming

PRIORITY ACTION

- Provide suitable nesting habitat on arable farms using set-aside, spring cereals or skylark plots in winter cereals.
- Skylarks can nest successfully in late-cut hay meadows, or silage fields that are not cut before late May and subsequent cuts are at least seven weeks apart.

Many of these guidelines may be funded by the Defra Environmental Stewardship Scheme. 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



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



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF. Tel: 01425 652381

