A management guide to birds of lowland farmland

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Dan Powell

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3.12 Conservation headlands

Conservation headlands is the name given to cereal crop headlands with restricted pesticide inputs to allow broad-leaved arable plants and their associated insects to flourish, but still allowing control of grass weeds and cleavers, and with no restrictions on the use of fungicides or plant growth regulators. An additional step of using no fertiliser in the headlands will create a more open crop structure and further benefit the less competitive weeds. This may also reduce the burden of the more competitive weeds in the conservation headlands.

3.12.1 Wildlife use

Conservation headlands are the outer margins of cereal crops (usually between 6 m and 24 m wide) that do not receive insecticides after 15 March or broad-spectrum herbicides so that broad-leaved weeds and their associated insects can flourish (Plate 3.18). In some cases, no fertiliser is applied to the headland.

The restrictions on pesticide use on conservation headlands are designed to control invasive grass weeds and cleavers, but allow most other broad-leaved weeds to survive. These weeds may provide seed food for birds, but also act as food plants for a wide range of insects that are important food for the chicks of many declining bird species. Conservation headlands are particularly well-suited to the conservation of grey partridges because the chicks need to feed themselves from the moment that they hatch. These headlands provide a rich, accessible insect food resource immediately adjacent to the nesting habitat in the field margin. A cereal crop provides an ideal structure allowing grey partridge chicks to forage within it, but with a canopy protecting them from weather and predators. One study showed that conservation headlands increased average chick survival from 4.8 to 7.3 birds per brood. Rare arable plants may benefit from conservation headland management, especially if no fertiliser is applied.

The stubble from a conservation headland will also be a valuable source of weed seeds for birds if it can be left through the winter. Conservation headlands also act as a buffer zone, protecting adjacent field margin habitats from drift of the most damaging pesticides.

Plate 3.18 The ideal result of conservation headland management is a sprinkling of broad-leaved weeds in the crop base.

P Thompson (The Game Conservancy)

3.12.2 Practical management

Conservation headlands are most suited to light soils with no heavy burden of competitive weeds such as barren brome or cleavers. Although the herbicide regime is designed to control these, it is often less effective than conventional crop management. There is an element of risk in adopting conservation headlands on sites where grass weed build-up is likely to occur. In these situations, management that is likely to exacerbate the grass weed problem, such as minimum tillage or direct drilling, should be carefully considered before combining with conservation headland management.

The ideal location of conservation headland management is in cereal fields adjacent to good field margin (Figure 3.8) or beetle bank nesting cover for grey partridges. This enables birds to move chicks quickly from the nest site to the foraging areas after hatching.