The grey partridge can be found in most farming systems except predominantly improved grasslands. The UK grey partridge population fell by 87% between 1970 and 2003. This has been mainly caused by the loss of insect food sources on farmland. The loss of seed sources, the loss of nesting habitat and the effects of predation have also contributed.

Insects to feed to chicks in the spring and summer
Grey partridge chicks feed on insects, especially caterpillars, sawfly, beetles, bugs, ants and aphids. Chick survival is higher when there is plenty of this food available. Chicks take insects mainly from crop margins.

Lots of seeds throughout the year
Adult grey partridges feed mainly on seeds and shoots throughout the year. They seek places where they can find lots of seed food. Such areas include winter stubbles, wild bird cover/game cover, root crops, newly-sown crops and weeds in the crop margins.

Safe nesting cover
Grey partridges nest on the ground in vegetation cover provided by hedge banks, dyke sides, grassy field margins, beetle banks, winter cereals, game cover, ditches and nettle beds. Well drained areas with dead tussocky grass left over from the previous year is particularly attractive as nesting cover.
HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE GREY PARTRIDGES?

You can provide seed food throughout the winter at a low cost with a one-acre plot of wild bird cover. Establish a seed-rich crop in the spring and maintain it for two years. Kale and quinoa are particularly useful components in the mix.

On arable land

- Only use pesticides when the infestation exceeds the economic threshold. Try to avoid using broad-spectrum insecticides after 15 March. These remove beneficial insects and spiders that move into the crops in spring. The loss of this food source is particularly damaging to grey partridges.
- Adopt conservation headlands. Avoid spraying the edges of cereal fields with insecticides or herbicides targeted at broad-leaved weeds. This enables beneficial insects and chick food for grey partridges to survive.
- Consider using reduced herbicide application rates, to check weeds.
- Cultivate stubbles as late as possible and avoid spraying off. This helps provide important winter feeding habitat.
- Create grass margins around arable fields as nesting habitat for grey partridges. Include species such as cocksfoot in the seed mix to create tussocks. After the margins are established, cut only in the autumn once every three years. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year.
- Use beetle banks in fields greater than 16 hectares to provide nesting cover and overwintering 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

- Growing spring-sown arable fodder crops or small plots of wild bird cover will benefit grey partridges in areas of largely agricultural grassland. The crop and stubble provide abundant seed food.
- Undersown cereal crops will provide seed food through the winter. The lack of cultivation in the autumn as well as restrictions on herbicide use will produce many insects and provide winter cover.
- Fence off margins of up to six metres around improved grass fields and leave these uncut, ungrazed and unsprayed. Grazes or cut in September every two-to-three years. Avoid cutting all margins in the same year. Select margins that are adjacent to existing permanent margins.
- Research by the Game Conservancy Trust shows that legal control of predators such as carrion crows, magpies and foxes can help to maintain grey partridge numbers.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:
- Wild bird seed mixtures
- Over wintered stubbles
- Conservation headlands
- Arable field margins
- Beetle banks

Contacts and advice
The best way to help grey partridges on your farm/croft is to walk the ground with an adviser and discuss options for management and funding.

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK charity that speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.