Wild bird cover is also called wild bird seed mixtures, or unharvested crops. It involves sowing a mixture of seed bearing plants, recreating habitats that were once common on many farms. Like the traditional game crops used on sporting estates and farms, it acts as a giant birdtable, providing insects and seeds throughout the year.

WBC is an option (wild bird seed mix/unharvested crops), in Rural Development Contracts and is available both in the land managers options and rural priorities.

Birds that benefit from WBC include grey partridges, song thrushes, house sparrows, tree sparrows, linnets, twites, yellowhammers, reed buntings, corn buntings, barn owls and kestrels. Brown hares use the crop and bats hunt over it, in search of insects. If the cover contains weeds, it can support farmland birds' chicks.
**SUITABLE MIXES**

### Two-year mix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed Mix</th>
<th>kg per ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oats</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale, Merlin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale, Maris Kestrel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale, Keeper</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinoa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring oil-seed rape</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clover, red, broadleaved Merviot</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clover, red, late-flowering Altaswede</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cost:** approx. £70 per ha

### One-year mix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed Mix</th>
<th>kg per ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oats</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinoa</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring oil-seed rape</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clover, red, broadleaved Merviot</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>73.75</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cost:** approx. £48 per ha

### One-year mix for poor ground

This mix is suited to land that has been set-aside or out of production for several years and is low in fertility and lime. It can be established where other more demanding crops such as kale and quinoa would fail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed Mix</th>
<th>kg per ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oats</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linseed</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil-seed rape, Molino</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61.25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cost:** approx. £58 per ha

### One-year mix for corn bunting areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seed Mix</th>
<th>kg per ha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triticale</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barley</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oats</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linseed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red clover</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cost:** approx. £44 per ha

### Pros and cons of one- and two-year mixes

**One-year mixes**

**Advantages**
- A plentiful supply of seeds each winter
- Easier to establish, particularly on poor ground where kale would fail
- Benefits grain-eating birds such as corn buntings
- Less weed build up than two-year mix

**Disadvantages**
- More expensive as ground needs to be cultivated and sown each year
- Less cover due to the absence of kale

**Two-year mixes**

**Advantages**
- Good cover and protection from predators under canopy of kale, creates bare ground for invertebrates, providing food for birds such as partridge and song thrush
- Cheaper as cultivation and seed costs are only incurred every other year

**Disadvantages**
- Less seeds in second winter, particularly of cereals, so less valuable for grain-eating birds
- Greater weed build up as ground is left uncultivated for two years. Not recommended for organic systems where herbicides cannot be used
- Kale is vulnerable to a range of pests and diseases – club root, flea beetle, slugs, pigeons and deer
- Kale stems are woody and difficult to plough down, and may need to be grazed or cut first

**Cereals**

are a major component of WBC mixes. Oats and/or barley are generally used. Larger buntings benefit from barley grains, whilst smaller farmland birds prefer oats, which also have the advantage of being easier to establish on poor soils. **Triticale** is used in some game crops, but small finches cannot eat its large seed. It is, however, more resistant to rabbit grazing than other cereals and its stiff straw stands through the winter.

**Linseed** generally attracts finches, particularly goldfinches. The elevated heads can hold seed throughout the winter on which goldfinches feed in a typical hanging manner.

If the crop is to be retained for two years, it should contain a biennial. **Kale** is the most commonly used, and you can combine several varieties to provide different canopy heights and insurance against one variety failing due to club root or other factors. Thousand-headed kale is widely used in Scotland, while Caledonian kale is particularly resistant to club root. Rules on fertiliser applications should be checked and may limit the success of kale.

**Quinoa** is a giant form of fat hen. It produces abundant seeds each winter. It is a tall, striking plant, but does not withstand the winter.

**Oil seed rape (OSR)** is often included in WBC mixes because it is cheap and the oily, protein-rich seeds are favoured by most finch species – particularly linnet, twites and goldfinches.

In vegetable growing areas, where club root may be an issue, brassicas can be substituted for inseed and clover.

### LOCATION

Traditionally, game cover crops are located along woodland edges and next to hedges, dykes and other field boundaries. This attracts species such as the song thrush, tree sparrow, yellowhammer and grey partridge. Other species will benefit from a different location. Corn buntings require some nearby cover, but not dense woodland.

Isolated trees or overhead wires can provide a suitable retreat and songpost next to the cover crop. Skylarks tend to avoid boundary structures, preferring more open landscapes. Siting some areas of WBC away from hedges and trees will cater for this species.

Game cover crops are often established in numerous small strips, which suits the dispersed foraging of game birds. Some small birds, however, form large flocks in the winter and may prefer fewer larger blocks of WBC. Forming flocks helps birds by increasing their chances of evading predators. It allows them to feed effectively, as each bird needs to spend less time watching out for predators. Both strips and blocks of cover have their merits, so the most appropriate for individual holdings should be chosen and advice sought if necessary.
FARMING AND CROFTING FOR WILDLIFE

Wild bird cover

Some birds, such as wrens and robins, enjoy the rich food and cover that a field of multiflowered grassland provides. However, many birds need food and cover throughout the year. Wild bird cover is also called birdseed or wild bird seed mixtures. It involves providing seeds, and sometimes insects, as a food source, and also nesting sites for birds including corn buntings. WBC is an option (wild bird seed mixtures) for birds that benefit from WBC, such as quinoa, imitate this type of seed.

WHAT BIRDS NEED

Most farmland birds depend on seeds during the winter. Skylarks, sparrows and buntings can eat cereal grains, but some other species are dependant on smaller seeds of various plants. The seeds of plants such as charlock, fat hen, knapweed and redshank, and of various wild grasses, are important components of farmland birds’ diet. Some of the cultivated crops included in WBC, such as quinoa, imitate this type of seed.

If weeds are numerous, WBC supports more insects than weed-free conventional crops, as many insects depend on particular weeds. Most farmland bird chicks are fed on insects before they fledge and switch to a seed-based diet. As well as providing food, WBC offers shelter and protection from predators. It can also provide nest sites for birds including corn buntings.

Rural Development Contracts allow plots of up to 2 ha. If for example, between two and five plots of 0.5 ha were established per 100 ha, a plentiful supply of seed could be made available around the farm.

WHAT BIRDS NEED

SOWING

All components of the mix should be sown into the same ground. It is best to sow the cereal component separately, but the components can be mixed together and direct-drilled. You can broadcast the mix instead – but increase the sowing rate by one third to allow for wastage. Small seeds such as linseed may benefit from separate broadcasting onto previously rolled ground after the other components have been sown. Rolling the ground again afterwards often produces better results than harrowing. Kale is a more demanding crop; it generally needs fertiliser to establish. The use of farmyard manure is an effective fertiliser and adds value by increasing weed and invertebrate numbers.

MANAGEMENT

Try to establish areas of WBC each year. A mosaic of cover of varying ages helps to ensure food and cover are available all year round. In corn buntings areas one-year cereal-based mixes should be established.

Birds can still be helped when it is time to replace the WBC with a crop. If cover is ploughed in and the ground prepared to a fine tilth, large quantities of seed will be revealed. If possible, leave these areas for a while before sowing, so that birds can feed on this rich seed source.

Kingfisher

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON WBC SEE:

Farming and Cropping for Wildlife

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- corn bunting
- yellowhammer
- tree sparrow
- linnet
- reed bunting
- tree sparrow
- corn bunting
- yellowhammer

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 for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing – help us keep it that way.

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:

The Advisory Manager, RSPB Scotland, Dunsinane House, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP Tel: 0131 31 1 6500

SAC (Scottish Agricultural College), King’s Buildings, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG Tel: 031 528 4600

NFU Scotland, Head Office, Rural Centre, West Mains, Ingliston, Edinburgh EH28 8LT Tel: 0131 472 4000

Scottish Natural Heritage, St Andrew’s House, 25 The Mound, Edinburgh EH1 2JY Tel: 0131 535 4000

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), 1 Birdcage Walk, London SW1P 2AP Tel: 020 7458 8600

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