Most set-aside is managed as rotational set-aside, which can provide seed food for birds through the winter, or fixed set-aside, which can buffer wildlife habitats and provide nesting and insect-rich habitat through the summer. These benefits are dependent on the management adopted and, often, slight tweaks in management can lead to big wildlife benefits.

In addition, set-aside can be used to create wild bird cover crops, plant new woodland, grow short-rotation coppice or, under a derogation from Defra, provide nesting habitat for lapwings, feeding habitat for wintering swans and geese or habitat for rare arable plants. There are also several Environmental Stewardship options that can be sited on set-aside.

**BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

- **Rotational set-aside can provide seed food for birds and nesting habitat for birds such as skylarks**
  Rotational set-aside can provide seed food for birds through the winter, depending on how intensively weeds were managed in the preceding crop. It can also provide nesting habitat for ground-nesting birds, depending on when the green cover is destroyed.

- **Fixed set-aside can be used to buffer wildlife habitats, or boost insect abundance and nesting opportunities on the farm**
  Fixed set-aside can be used to buffer watercourses, woodland, hedgerows or unimproved habitats on the farm. Permanent grassland areas on an arable farm can also boost insect abundance and provide safe nesting opportunities for ground-nesting birds.

- **Environmental Stewardship or derogations from Defra can be used to provide a wider range of benefits**
  Under Entry Level Stewardship, there are options for creating wild bird seed mixtures or pollen and nectar mixtures on set-aside. There is also a wild bird cover option for set-aside management outside of Stewardship. Under Higher Level Stewardship, there are options for cultivating fallow plots for ground-nesting birds such as lapwings or for rare arable plants on set-aside. Outside of Stewardship, these habitats can be created on set-aside, but require a derogation from Defra to destroy the green cover. A derogation from Defra can be sought to create a fertile grass sward to attract wintering swans and geese away from crops.
Rotational set-aside
• Rotational set-aside is best managed on a whole-field basis as hedgerow species, such as tree sparrows and yellowhammers, are likely to feed within 10 m of the hedge, whilst skylarks are more likely to feed in the middle of the field, away from the hedge.
• Natural regeneration can provide an ideal seed source for birds from harvest until the point when the green cover is destroyed. The benefit for birds depends on the amount of weed seed and spilt grain in the field. Stubbles of broad-leaved crops, low-input cereals or cereals with conservation headlands will be the best. Pre-harvest herbicides will reduce the benefits.
• Spraying is preferable to cutting or cultivation between April and August as this does not destroy nests. However, nesting cover and food resources will decline within two weeks of spraying.
• If the vegetation is largely broad-leaved weeds and volunteer cereals then weed control is not as crucial and

Fixed set-aside
• Fixed set-aside is ideal for taking unproductive arable land out of production. These may be field margin strips, whole fields or areas in the middle of fields. All can be managed for the benefit of wildlife. Fixed set-aside can also be used to buffer wildlife habitats such as woodland, watercourses, hedges, ponds and unimproved habitats.
• Green cover can be established by natural regeneration or sowing. Natural regeneration can be better for wildlife in terms of creating a varied sward of native plants, but is prone to infestations of annual grass weeds, thistles or docks.
• If sowing a green cover, it is best to use a mix of native perennial grasses. A seed mix containing tussock-forming grasses (eg cocksfoot and Timothy) and fine grasses (eg fescues and bents) will form a more varied sward and be particularly beneficial for small mammals.
• Wild flower seed can be incorporated into the mix to attract nectar-feeding insects, but this will make the mix more expensive. If you decide to do this, choose native flowers which will survive in a tall grass sward, such as scabious, knapweed and yarrow. Drill at a low seed rate to allow some natural regeneration to occur, as this will increase the diversity of the sward.
• Most fixed set-aside has to be cut between 15 July and 15 August. Cut as late as possible to protect late-nesting skylarks and corn buntings.
• Up to 25% of each set-aside block can be left uncut. It is best to rotate this 25% around the set-aside field annually. Alternatively, the same area can be left uncut for up to three years.
• Two-metre margins of fixed set-aside fields can be left uncut permanently. Use this option around fields with thin hedgerows to allow these to widen.
• It is possible to get a derogation from Defra to leave larger areas uncut if there is an environmental reason for doing so (for more information, contact one of the advisory bodies listed at the end of this leaflet).
• Grazing is permitted between 1 September and 14 January. Grazing can create a more varied sward and boost the abundance of invertebrates in the field.
• If perennial weeds like thistles, docks or ragwort flourish then you may need to control them by spot-spraying or weed-wiping to avoid damaging the rest of the sward.

How can I manage set-aside for wildlife?
- Fixing set-aside in the spring helps to maximise the number of wild birds which can then feed on the sward throughout the summer.
- Rotating set-aside in the late summer helps to reduce the risk of weed problems and maintain a diverse sward.
- Rotating set-aside in the late summer helps to reduce the risk of weed problems and maintain a diverse sward.
HOW CAN I MANAGE SET-ASIDE FOR WILDLIFE?

**Nesting plots for lapwings**
- Where set-aside is likely to attract nesting lapwings, then you could use Higher Level Stewardship or a derogation from Defra to create a fallow nesting plot for them (see separate sheet on ‘fallow plots for ground-nesting birds’ for more details). If using a derogation, make sure that it is in place before destroying the green cover.
- Select a field that has been regularly used by nesting lapwings in the past. If previous nest sites are not known, then choose a large arable field adjacent to grazed pasture.
- Avoid locating a plot next to a tall hedge or a wood.
- Plough and disc 2 ha or more in February or early March (or plough in the autumn and allow to weather down through the winter). Late winter cultivation has the added benefit of providing a seed food source through the winter for birds.
- Avoid cutting or cultivating the plot between mid-March and mid-July.
- The plot can be moved around the farm to find a successful site, or kept in a fixed location.

**Managing set-aside for over-wintering swans and geese**
- An improved grass sward can attract wintering swans and geese away from crops. They will select grassland that receives fertiliser applications or clover in the mix. You may require a derogation from Defra to create the right sward.
- The set-aside should be sited on land that has previously been used by geese, within 10 km of the roost site and not on land that already has wildlife interest.
- Use whole fields of 10 ha or more, and allow 15–30 ha for every 1,000 geese. Two or three separate parcels of land are better than a single block as geese can move between sites if disturbed.
- Sow a mix of perennial ryegrass, Timothy and white clover at a ratio of 5:1:1 with 5% of fescues at a total seed rate of 30 kg per ha.
- Graze or cut the sward to a height of 5 cm in September, and remove the cuttings if possible.

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

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**KEY POINTS**

- Use this leaflet in conjunction with the latest set-aside management rules to ensure compliance.
- Choose a range of management options to provide wider benefits for wildlife.
- Manage rotational set-aside to boost the seed food supply and prolong the safe nesting period as far as possible.
- Manage fixed set-aside to boost insect abundance and provide safe nesting habitat.

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**Key**

- **ELS** = Entry Level Stewardship
- **OELS** = Organic Entry Level Stewardship
- **HLS** = Higher Level Stewardship
- **SA** = Set-aside