The skylark can be found on all farm types. Densities are highest on lowland arable and mixed farming systems. The UK skylark population fell by 53% between 1970 and 2004*. This decline was largely caused by the move from spring to winter cereals, as well as intensified grassland management.

* Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

Mid-field areas in which to nest and feed
Skylarks occupy the open fields to avoid predators. They cannot be conserved by measures taken within 10 metres of the field boundary.

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. Skylarks 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.

Seeds and weeds throughout the year
Adult skylarks feed on leaves and seeds of both crops and weeds. The skylark’s strong association with weedy stubbles in winter shows they prefer seeds and weed leaves.

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 and pasture.
HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SKYLARKS?

**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.
- Weedy stubbles are the most beneficial winter feeding habitat for skylarks on the arable farm. Consider using reduced herbicide application rates, to check, rather than clear, weeds. Even sprayed stubbles generally provide more food than cultivated ground or autumn-sown crops.
- Cultivate stubbles as late as possible and avoid spraying off. The best stubbles are those that can be maintained until the end of March.
- Create tussocky grass margins around arable fields to create overwintering habitat for beneficial insects, which move into the crops in the spring.
- Use beetle banks in fields greater than 20 hectares to provide nesting cover and overwintering habitat for insects. Beetle banks are grass strips through the middle of arable fields. Such fields can be managed as one unit, as the headland at each end of the beetle bank 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.
- 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 fodder crops (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in areas dominated by grassland.
- Skylarks can nest in grazed pasture if you can maintain a tussocky sward with a low stocking rate through the spring and summer. Unimproved grasslands often hold high densities of skylarks.
- Allow some grassland to go to seed at the end of the summer and leave uncut and ungrazed through the winter in areas away from hedgerows or woodland.

**Hill farms**
- Where out-wintered cattle are fed wholecrop silage, and where sheep are fed bruised oats/grain from outdoor troughs, skylarks will forage for the grains of arable crop and seeds of weeds found in the feed. This provides a valuable winter food source for flocks of seed-eating birds.
- Extensive grazing can provide suitable nesting habitat if the sward is maintained at over 15cm.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:
- Arable crops on livestock
- Beetle banks
- Silage and hay management
- Wild bird cover
- Overwintered stubble.

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

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit [www.farmwildlife.info](http://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.

Front cover picture by Chris Gomersall (rspb-images.com)

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654

775-0140-09-10

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

- **RSPB Scotland**
  - The Advisory Manager, RSPB Scotland, Dunedin House, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP
  - Tel: 0131 311 6500

- **SAC (Scottish Agricultural College)**
  - King’s Buildings, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG
  - Tel: 0131 535 4000

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

- **Scottish Natural Heritage**
  - Scottish Natural Heritage, Great Glen House, Leadhikin Road, Inverness, IV3 8NW
  - Tel: 01463 725000

**NESTING HABITAT**
- Open grassland and arable crops allowing ready access to the ground.

**SUMMER FOOD**
- Insects for chicks from low-input cereals and grasslands.

**WINTER FOOD**
- Seeds from weedy stubbles and wild bird cover.