



Fact sheet 4

Providing winter cover and food for wild grey partridges

For birds like the grey partridge, farmland in most parts of the UK is not the habitat that it used to be. The patchwork of small weedy fields on farms with a diverse range of crops has been replaced by intensively managed large blocks of single crops. Today, farmland can be a hungry place for birds, especially in winter. Fewer spring crops (and therefore autumn stubbles), efficient weed control practices (both chemical and cultural), more efficient combines and food safety regulations governing the cleanliness of grain stores, have all reduced the amount of winter food (weed

seeds and spilt grain) in the countryside. Grey partridges have evolved to deal effectively with cold weather but they do not cope well if food is not abundant. So, the manager seeking to increase numbers of grey partridges, must make provision to provide food right through the winter and to provide shelter from the worst of the winter rain and gales. Increasingly, the importance of winter predation means that a place to hide from winged predators is also important, especially in February and March when cover left over from winter is often ploughed up.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust

For over 75 years our scientists have been researching why species like the grey partridge, water vole, corn bunting and black grouse have declined. We are continually developing practical measures to reverse these declines.

Our aim is simple - a thriving countryside rich in game and other wildlife.

We are an independent charity reliant on voluntary donations and the support of people who care about the survival of our natural heritage.

What makes good winter cover?

Good cover needs to be sufficiently high by the start of the winter weather (30cm), it must stand throughout the season and not succumb to the first frost and flop over. It must be food rich, producing a steady surplus of small nutritious seeds all winter (it's no good if they run out in November if February/March are the really hungry months). The food must also be readily accessible. Many a partridge has got neck-

ache staring up at sunflower seeds being eaten by the finches.

Winter cover works best in relatively small parcels scattered around the farm rather than one or two large pieces. Grey partridges have territories and home ranges, so you will need adequate winter cover in each covey's patch. A long strip of cover could provide for the needs of several coveys.

A long strip of winter cover can provide for the needs of several coveys.



Why should you read this fact sheet?

This series of fact sheets explains how to restore grey partridges on your farm, based on the results of our practical research. Restoring these birds on farmland will help us to achieve Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets for this and other BAP species, including other ground-nesting birds and rare arable wildflowers. It will also allow you to achieve the best out of your wild gamebirds.

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How to create winter cover on the farm

In existing crops: Leave stubbles as long as possible before ploughing. Stubbles following an undersown crop are particularly valuable because they remain uncultivated through the spring within the ley. Some grant aid will be available for this under the new Environmental Stewardship Schemes. Do not spray stubbles.

If you are growing fodder crops, try to leave them as long as possible before grazing them off. Winter oilseed rape provides valuable cover in February/March, at a time of year when other forms of cover are ploughed up for spring drilling. Try to scatter this crop around the farm in smaller rather than large blocks.

Wild bird seed mix: Plant seed-bearing crops in open areas (not close to woodland) where grey partridges are likely to be foraging. These should be based on a mixture of three crops such as kale, quinoa, linseed, cereals, millet or rape. These can be planted in patches from six metres wide, to two hectares in

size, but there should be no more than three hectares in total per 100 hectares of arable land under the new Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) in England, and the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) in Scotland. However, in England crops such as maize and sorghum are not allowed and you will only be entitled to claim grant for half a hectare of such cover in every 20 hectares of your land. Remember that mixtures of winter cover left uncut at the end of the season and allowed to reseed in a second year can make excellent brood-rearing cover the following year. This is especially true if kale was in the original mixture. This second year cover is very important for pairs of grey partridges when the coveys break up early in the new year. It is at this time of year that they are highly dependent on this cover to avoid predation from sparrowhawks and foxes. Therefore only renew half of your mixes each year, leaving the other half to provide this important cover.

Planting cover crops on stubbles: Winter cover can also be grown in the form of stubble turnips on mustard. This creates cover from harvest to spring ploughing, and can provide important 'in field' cover.

Feeding: Extra food can be provided in feeders and is probably needed at least from late winter. A separate fact sheet on this practice has been produced entitled *Late winter and spring feeding of pheasants and partridges*.

Good winter cover for grey partridges.



More information

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust's Advisory Service can provide further advice on feeding systems for gamebirds, and on all aspects of game management. For information, please contact 01425 651013.

