



Conservation headlands



Above: Sites for conservation headlands should be chosen carefully so that management will encourage some broad-leaved weeds within the crop.

Conservation headlands are headlands of cereal crops that are sprayed selectively so that wild broad-leaved plants can grow and the insects that live and feed on the plants can survive. Choosing sites where there are few weeds and where nutrient levels are low helps to ensure a low risk of highly competitive weeds growing. There are no restrictions on the use of fungicides. Conservation headlands can be funded by Rural Development Contracts in areas where they are likely to benefit species such as grey partridges, corn buntings and tree sparrows, as well as arable wild flowers, beneficial insects and small mammals.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Conservation headlands allow some broad-leaved plants in the cereal crop margin

Conservation headlands in appropriate places will contain small populations of broad-leaved plants, which have little competitive impact on a crop. This type of management is ideal for sites with rare arable plants, but is also appropriate for fields in areas with light soils which are unlikely to be infested with highly competitive weeds, such as cleavers.

Conservation headlands boost insect numbers in the margin

Broad-leaved arable plants support many insects that do no harm to the crop, including predatory insects, which help to control crop pests. Tussocky grass field margins provide an ideal over-wintering habitat for many such insects. Many move into the crop in the spring and need protection from insecticides once they become active, typically from mid-March. Studies have shown that the overall effect of conservation headland management is to boost the numbers of beneficial insects in the crop margin.

Conservation headlands provide an ideal feeding habitat for partridge chicks and other farmland birds

Chicks of most farmland birds depend on insects for food. Grey partridge chicks, in particular, forage on the ground in cereal crops, which give them shelter without being so dense that their movement is impeded or they are soaked in wet weather. An abundance of insects in the crop headlands and margins is essential for these birds to survive. Birds such as linnets and twites feed their young on broad-leaved weed seeds.

HOW CAN I SITE AND MANAGE CONSERVATION HEADLANDS?

Where to site conservation headlands

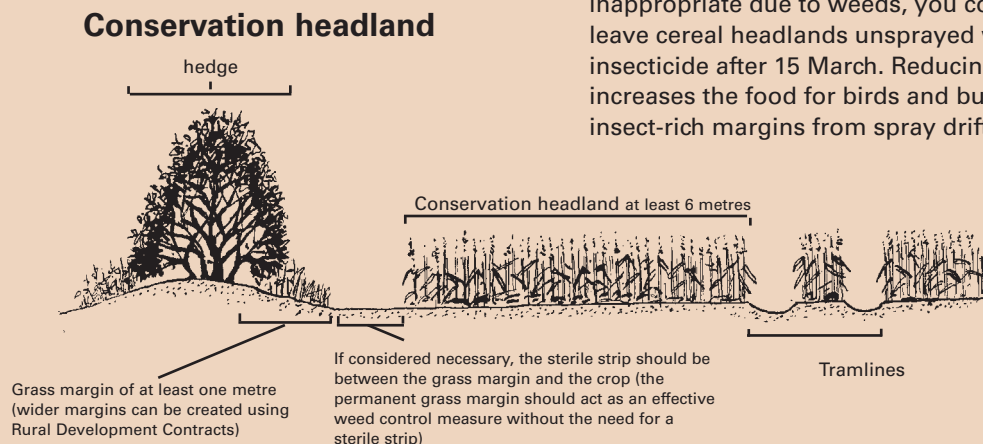
- The ideal location for conservation headlands is alongside tussocky grass margins or beetle banks that provide over-wintering sites for a wide range of insects.
- Conservation headland management is most suited to light soils where there are no problems with high weed infestations, eg cleavers. Fields with a history of low inputs are also good locations. Where inputs have been high, broad-leaved weed re-establishment may initially be slow. In such cases, it may be necessary to leave the conservation headland in the same location for a number of years to allow improvement after the first year.
- This management is appropriate for linseed, oilseed rape, protein and cereal crops. The aim is to allow some broad-leaved weeds in the headland and to encourage the insects that live on them. If you get an unexpected infestation of weeds that cannot be controlled with selective herbicides, choose a less weed-prone location in the following years.
- Conservation headlands should be rotated around the farm. This helps prevent an excessive weed burden.

Managing conservation headlands

- Conservation headlands are generally between 6 and 12 metres wide – depending on which section of the sprayer boom can be switched off. The outer section is switched off when spraying the headland of a cereal crop with any insecticide after 15 March or any herbicide that targets broad-leaved weeds.
 - You can apply glyphosate before harvest as, by this stage, the insects that eat plants affected by it will have completed their life cycles.
 - Check for weeds in February/March, and in May. If cleavers become a problem, selectively treat them in February or March. Seek further advice about other broadleaved weeds.
 - A sterile strip around the crop edge will control weeds but it shouldn't be necessary
- with perennial grass margins between the field boundary and crop. Sterile strips should be between grass margins and crops.
 - Not using any nitrogenous fertiliser within the conservation headland benefits the less competitive arable plants and reduces invasive weeds, although yields may be lower. This is especially beneficial where there are rare arable plants.
 - If conservation headlands are funded under Rural Development Contracts, permission must be granted by SGRPID before insecticides or broadleaf herbicides can be used. Current constraints and legal requirements with regard to all chemical applications should be established with SGRPID prior to use.

Insecticide use on crop margins

- Where conservation headlands are inappropriate due to weeds, you could still leave cereal headlands unsprayed with insecticide after 15 March. Reducing spraying increases the food for birds and buffers the insect-rich margins from spray drift.



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



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KEY POINTS

- Rural Development Contracts can fund conservation headlands, which are beneficial in areas where there are grey partridges, yellowhammers, corn buntings and tree sparrows.
- Conservation headlands can boost predatory insect numbers and this helps with pest control.
- Avoiding using insecticides in cereal headlands is a useful measure where full conservation headland management is not appropriate.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Corn bunting
- Grey partridge
- Tree sparrow
- Yellowhammer
- Arable field margins
- Beetle banks

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.

Front cover picture by Peter Thompson (GCT)

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