Skylark plots

In conventional winter cereal fields, skylarks can forage comfortably early in the season as they favour shorter vegetation, but by June they are forced to forage outside of the field due to the density of the crop.

If all of the surrounding fields are also winter crops, skylarks can continue to struggle to find suitable foraging habitat. Providing skylark plots can help them to continue to forage easily in the field throughout the breeding season.

What

Skylark plots are bare patches in winter cereal fields designed to help skylarks to forage. These plots are proven to help improve productivity for skylarks and are a simple and highly effective measure.

Plots of at least 16m2 are created by leaving areas undrilled or by spraying out the area required. Skylark plots are particularly appropriate for farms where spring crops are not a major feature of rotations.

Skylark plots provide easy landing and foraging access, but are far enough away from the edge to be less susceptible to predation.

Why

In conventional winter cereal fields, skylarks can forage comfortably early in the season as they favour shorter vegetation, but by June they are forced to forage outside of the field due to the density of the crop. If all of the surrounding fields are also winter crops, skylarks

can continue to struggle to find suitable foraging habitat. Simply providing fields with 2 skylark plots/ha can help them to continue to forage easily in the field throughout the breeding season.

Two plots per hectare in winter cereals can boost the number of skylark chicks by 50%. If 20% of winter cereals were managed with 2 skylark plots per hectare then the national decline of skylarks would be halted.

Yellow wagtails, which are summer visitors mainly recorded nesting in eastern England, can also struggle to breed successfully in winter cereals late in the season so may also benefit from skylark plots.

How

Skylark plots are best when they are at least 16m^2 (e.g. 4m by 4m) each, with two plots per hectare. At the maximum density, the plots take up as little as 0.32% of the field area - less than the area taken up by tramlines.

The ideal fields for skylark plots are more than 5ha in size. They should have an open aspect, with fields bounded by trees or woodland unsuitable unless they are larger than 10ha in size.

To create skylark plots, switch off or lift up the drill to create undrilled patches at least 3m wide and with a total area of at least 16m^2. A tail-off of cereal grain in the plot after the drill has been switched off or lifted is to be expected.

Alternatively, if machinery cannot be switched off or lifted, the field can be drilled as normal and a total herbicide sprayed onto the plot area before the end of December. However, this may be less valuable as sprayed plots can develop lower vegetation cover and reduce opportunities for the insects which skylarks forage for.

Skylark plots should not be connected to tramlines and should be sited away from field boundaries and telegraph poles to reduce the risk of predation. Ideally plots should be more than 80m from field edges to improve breeding performance.

No ongoing management is necessary, with plots receiving the same spray and fertiliser applications as the rest of the field. Where there are issues with difficult weeds such as black grass or wild oats in plots, they can be controlled with a knapsack sprayer although there have been very few weed issues in skylark plot trials.

Farmwildlife: Case Study: Skylark Plots (http://farmwildlife.info/2013/06/04/case-study-skylark-plots/)