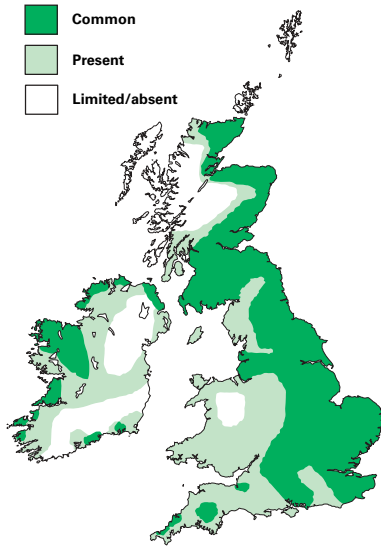




for birds  
for people  
for ever



Distribution map showing the relative abundance of skylarks in Britain and Ireland 1988-91



Nigel Blake (rspb-images.com)

This brown farmland bird is best known for its loud, continuous warbling song, performed high in the air.

The skylark can be found on all types of farm. 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 by intensified grassland management.

\*Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

## WHAT DO SKYLARKS NEED?

### Mid-field areas in which to nest and feed.

Skylarks occupy open fields to avoid predators. They cannot be conserved by measures taken within 10 metres of the field boundary.

### Seeds and weeds throughout the year.

Adults feed on leaves and seeds of crops and weeds. Their strong association with weedy stubbles in winter shows the importance of seeds and weed leaves.

### 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. They 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.

### 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, set-aside and pasture.

## ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A SKYLARK

January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Winters in seed-rich areas, such as stubble fields			Breeding season			Winters in seed-rich areas, such as stubble fields					
			1st broods		2nd broods		3rd broods				

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SKYLARKS?

### Nesting habitat and summer food

- **SA** Leave rotational set-aside unsprayed for as long as possible (ideally July) to provide both nesting habitat and summer food.
- **SA** Leave fixed set-aside uncut for as long as possible (August) and make use of the option to leave 25% uncut on a rotational basis around the set-aside area to provide both nesting habitat and summer food.
- Include spring crops in the rotation to provide more accessible nesting and feeding habitat.
- **ELS** Create skylark plots (small undrilled patches) in winter cereals to boost nesting success. Two plots per hectare (approximately 20 m<sup>2</sup> each) in fields larger than five hectares can boost productivity by almost 50%.
- **ELS** Create tussocky grass margins around arable fields to create over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects, which move into the crops in the spring, and use beetle banks in fields

greater than 16 hectares to provide over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects in the field centres.

- Skylarks can nest successfully in hay or silage fields if they are not cut or grazed between early April and the end of May, and subsequent cuts are at least seven weeks apart.
- **ELS** **HLS** Skylarks can nest successfully in grazed pastures if you can maintain a tussocky sward with a low stock rate through the spring and summer. Unimproved grasslands managed without inputs often hold high densities of skylarks.
- Introduce arable crops on livestock farms (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in pastoral areas.

### Winter food

- **ELS** **HLS** Weedy over-wintered stubbles are the most beneficial winter-feeding habitat for skylarks on arable farms. The best stubbles are cereal stubbles that receive no pre-harvest glyphosate and no post-harvest herbicides, and can be maintained until the end of the following March.
- 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.

## PRIORITY ACTION



- Provide suitable nesting habitat on arable farms using set-aside, spring cereals or skylark plots in winter cereals.
- Skylarks can nest successfully in late-cut hay meadows, or silage fields that are not cut before late May and subsequent cuts are at least seven weeks apart.

### See also the RSPB advisory sheets on

- Arable crops on livestock farms
- Beetle banks
- Buffer strips on cultivated land
- Hay and silage meadows
- Over-wintered stubbles
- Set-aside management
- Skylark plots

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

### KEY

 = arable and mixed farms  = pastoral farms

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

Many of these guidelines may be funded by the Defra Environmental Stewardship Scheme. You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB,  
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,  
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL  
Tel: 01767 680551  
[www.rspb.org.uk/farming](http://www.rspb.org.uk/farming)



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