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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Farmland bird feeding stations



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Harvest tailings or spare grain can be used to help support seed-eating bird populations on the farm.

A feeding station is an area of the farm where you can put down waste grain and seed to provide food for seed-eating birds, especially through the winter, when their food can be in short supply. Retaining over-winter stubbles and growing an area of wild bird seed mixture (also known as wildlife or bird cover crops) are two other measures that can be used to boost the availability of seed. However, in the absence of these, spreading tailings (also known as screenings or cleanings) or other available seed sources through the winter, is the best alternative.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Use of tailings through the winter can support seed-eating birds in the absence of over-winter stubbles or wild bird seed mixtures.

Declining species, such as yellowhammers and tree sparrows, need seed food throughout the year. Providing seed food from October to March will help them to survive the winter. This is particularly important in areas where over-winter stubbles cannot be left uncultivated, and where it is not possible to establish a wildlife cover crop.

Tailings can be used to supplement over-winter stubbles or wild bird seed mixtures.

The quality of over-winter stubbles for birds depends on the amount of seed food within them. If the preceding crop was devoid of broad-leaved weeds and little grain was spilt during harvest, then the seed levels will be poor and depleted early in the winter. Likewise, wild bird seed mixtures will vary in terms of the abundance of seed produced, and therefore how long they last as a good feeding site. Tailings or other seed sources can be spread on adjacent tracks to supplement them.

Tailings can be spread in late winter and spring when other sources have become depleted.

Agri-environment schemes generally fund retention of over-winter stubbles up until mid-February. By this time, most wild bird seed mixtures will also be depleted, and new seed sources from native weeds may still be in short supply. Providing seed food from February until April may be critical to fill a gap in food availability and ensure the birds are fit enough to breed successfully.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I MANAGE A FARMLAND BIRD FEEDING STATION?

Where to put a feeding station

It is best to feed the birds regularly, so you should choose a location that you visit frequently in your normal work. The site should be away from grain stores and animal feed stores. The site should be in an area used by farmland birds such as sparrows and yellowhammers in winter, and close to a hedge or bushes so that birds can quickly find cover if they are disturbed. If you choose an open site away from hedges you may attract skylarks, but you are also more likely to attract woodpigeons and crows.

A non-cropped area, such as a farm track or area of short grassland, would be ideal, as you will then avoid re-introducing weed seed onto your arable land. A firm, free-draining surface is best as there is less risk of the seed rotting or germinating. It is important that the seed is not spread in thick vegetation, as it needs to be clearly visible to attract the birds.

What feed to use

Sparrows, finches and buntings feed on a variety of seeds including grain and small weed seeds. Tailings, the by-product of the grain cleaning process, can provide useful seed food if they are mostly weed seed and chipped or small grains. Pure cereal grain can also be used, but do not use tailings that are mostly husk or chaff as they are of no benefit to the birds. Given the

choice, birds prefer wheat to barley or oats because it has no husk.

Storage

Keep the seed dry and away from pests. It will be more convenient for you if you can store the seed near to the feeding site. You can get galvanised rodent-proof grain bins, which are also reasonably well protected from the weather.

When and how to feed

It is best to start feeding in early October so that the birds become used to a reliable food source before their other food supplies run out. Carry on feeding until at least the end of March. If possible, continue for as long as the birds are feeding at the site.

It is best to spread the seed thinly but ensure that it is clearly visible to birds. The amount of food you need to put out will depend on how many birds you are attracting, how much other food is available and the weather. The best approach is to judge how much to put out each week from the amount that was used in previous weeks. Be prepared to increase the amount put out as demand increases from October to December or January. Demand will be higher in periods of cold weather. The amount is likely to vary from 10 to 25 kg per week. On this basis, half a tonne of seed should be sufficient for a whole winter.

Do not wait more than a week before putting fresh food down. If there is still food left, reduce the amount slightly. It is a good idea to use an adjacent stretch of track each time so that new food does not pile up on top of old food. This will reduce the risk of diseases such as salmonella spreading through the bird populations. It will also reduce use of the feeding station by rodents, as farmland birds are more able to make use of a mobile feeding station that moves along a track or hedgerow through the winter.

KEY POINTS

- Putting out seed through the winter can support seed-eating birds in areas without stubbles or wild bird seed mixtures.
- A wide range of seed food can be used, such as grain, tailings or other seed.
- Moving the site along a track or rotating it around a field will help reduce the risks of bird diseases or rodents using the site.

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



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