Hedges are more than just lines of shrubs. They usually have some sort of herbaceous growth at or near the base and many contain mature trees. They may be set on banks and can have ditches along one or both sides. The best hedges have wide margins, often referred to as buffer strips or headlands, which are managed differently from the arable or grass crop. It is important that all these different components; mature trees, shrub layer, base/bank, ditch and margins, are thought about when deciding how to manage a hedge.

Farmland birds use all five components, and all need to be in good condition for the birds to thrive. Complete hedge management considers all components together and benefits birds much more than treating each separately.

To breed successfully, and survive through the winter months, farmland birds need access to a range of different resources that offer secure nesting places, summer food (especially invertebrates) and winter food (especially berries and seeds); the Big Three. For many farmland birds, hedges are a vital habitat in farmed landscapes, providing one or more of these basic requirements.

No one hedge can provide optimal requirements for all birds, so it is important to think about all the hedges on the farm or in the nearby landscape.

Well managed hedges can support a wide range of birds, including a number of species that are *red-listed* in the UK, such as grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*), turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*), linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*), cirl bunting (*Emberiza cirlus*) and yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*).

Some of the red-listed species, together with others like kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) and whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*), make-up the ‘Farmland Bird Indicator’, which is used by Government to assess the success of its policies relating to farmland biodiversity.

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* Red-listed birds are those that are globally threatened or have suffered major recent declines in range or population, as listed in Birds of Conservation Concern – A review of the status of UK birds by leading bird conservation organisations.

Shrub Layer

Just about all farmland birds that use hedges require dense cover for successful breeding, as well as for roosting, shelter and escape from predators. For example, finches often choose the intricate knotty growth in the flail line of the shrub layer or, along with warblers (such as blackcaps \((Sylvia atricapilla)\)), thick bramble or rose outgrowths. Blackthorn, hawthorn, elder and gorse make particularly good nesting places. Turtle doves like high (4m+) thorn hedges with plenty of creepers like traveller’s-joy. Other creepers that provide good nesting sites for bird species are honeysuckle, bryonies and roses.

Outgrowths of rose and bramble, and patches of suckering blackthorn and elm, make it much easier for birds to conceal their nests from predators, and provide more insect food. Wavy edges should be encouraged.

In the autumn and winter blackberries, haws, sloes and other berries are an important food source for many farmland birds, including fattening summer migrants like warblers for the long flight south, and wintering thrushes like redwing \((Turdus iliacus)\) and fieldfare \((Turdus pilaris)\).

Hedges that are cut every three years produce more than three times as many berries as those that are trimmed every year and 40% more berries than those cut every two years.

Many birds nest in the outer layers of hedges so are very vulnerable to cutting. Late season broods often survive best, so cutting in August and early September can be particularly harmful to populations. By the New Year most berries have been taken by birds, so January and February are the best times to cut, if ground conditions allow. Nests in hedges cut every year often fail, being easily found by predators.

Mature Trees

Scattered mature hedgerow trees are of great importance to wildlife. Not only do they attract huge numbers of invertebrates for birds (and bats) to feed on, but rot holes provide nesting sites for tree sparrows, starlings \((Sturnus vulgaris)\), kestrels and barn owls \((Tyto alba)\).

The ivy on these trees provides berries in the late winter when other food supplies are scarce, and provides good cover for roosting and for nesting spotted flycatchers \((Muscicapa striata)\). Ivy stems should not be cut unless there are specific reasons to do so, like a risk of smothering important lichens.

Generally, hedges which have developed into lines of tall trees, beyond the stage where they can easily be rejuvenated by laying or coppicing, are not so important for farmland birds, although a few large species like rooks will nest in the canopy. However, lines of trees are good feeding grounds for birds that are more typical of woodlands, like redstarts, tits and woodpeckers, and provide shelter for feeding swallows. Some tall hedges should be encouraged on the farm, especially in woody areas and where they link woodlands.
Hedge Base and Ditch

Dense tussocky grass and other perennial herbaceous growth at the base of hedges and along ditch sides provides essential cover for those birds like grey partridge that nest on or close to the ground. Yellowhammers and warblers particularly favour tussocky grasses growing up into the base of bushes.

Although many farmland birds rely on seeds and berries as adults, their young nearly all rely on invertebrates. Dense plant growth in and close to hedge bottoms is critical to allow these invertebrates, like large spiders, fly larvae and caterpillars, to increase in numbers. Spiders, beetles and other predators of crop pests overwinter in this habitat, moving out into the field in the summer, benefiting yields.

Margins

Late in the summer, tussocky grass strips at the bottom of hedges are often so dense that it is difficult for birds like partridges, finches, sparrows and yellowhammers to find the seeds and invertebrates they need. At this time of the year they prefer more open ground. In arable fields, margins or headlands beyond the grassy hedge base should ideally support a thin cover of grasses and herbs, with patchy bare ground. Even corn buntings will benefit from these margins; a threatened farmland bird that otherwise shuns hedges.

Other Farmland Habitats

Hedges, although important, are just one habitat needed for farmland birds to survive and breed successfully. Others include the crops themselves, stubbles, wild bird seed mixtures, patches of rough or fallow ground and farm buildings. Often only small areas of these are needed, for example 2ha of wild bird seed mixture and 1ha of nectar and pollen seed mixture for every 1,200ha of arable land, but it is vital that they should be present along with good hedges.

Not all farmland species use hedges, with a few, notably skylark and lapwing, actively avoiding them as they prefer more open landscapes. The chances of these birds breeding successfully are reduced within 80m of hedges because of the increased risk of predation from weasels, crows, etc. Where skylarks (Alauda arvensis) and lapwings (Vanellus vanellus) are present, new hedges should not be planted if this reduces field size to less than about 5ha.
Manage hedges to get all their components in good condition for birds, particularly the shrub layer, mature trees, base and margins; as well as other features like patches of waste ground. Birds need them all!

Think farm scale. Plan to have short, tall and in between hedges; follow the management cycle. As a rough guide, aim for 5% of hedges to be recently laid or coppiced, 60% between 1m and 3m tall, 30% between 3m and 5m high, and 5% lines of trees.

Create wide (over 2m) dense hedges with no gap at the base, by careful trimming and for livestock control.

Encourage irregular, wavy edges, 1-2m wide to develop, through leaving outgrowths of bramble and rose, along with patches of suckering blackthorn and elder.

Allow flowering and fruiting, and improve breeding success, by trimming shrubs every three or four years only. Cut hedges on rotation, no more than a third in any year.

Avoid trimming between March and early September, cutting most hedges in January or February if possible.

Look after mature hedgerow trees and encourage new ones by selecting and marking promising saplings or stems to grow on, or by new planting. Mature native fruit and berry producing trees like crab apple and hawthorn are valuable as well as large trees like oak.

Allow tussocky grass growth to develop at the base, preferably extending into the field by at least 2m, cutting this only to control scrub encroachment (about once every 5 years).

Further Information
R. Winspear & G. Davies (2005) A management guide to birds of lowland farmland. RSPB.
Growing farmland wildlife (with Environmental Stewardship). Natural England and Defra DVD.
http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/608078