

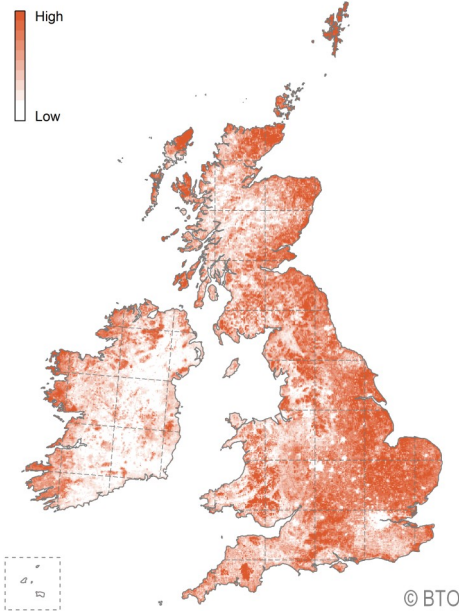


giving
nature
a home

LAND MANAGEMENT FOR WILDLIFE

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)

Breeding Relative Abundance 2008–11



Breeding abundance map reproduced from Balmer et al 2013 Bird Atlas with permission from British Trust for Ornithology.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

The skylark can be found on all types of farm. Densities are highest on lowland arable and mixed farming systems, and unimproved grasslands. The UK skylark population fell by 60% between 1970 and 2013. This decline was largely caused by the move from spring to winter cereals, and by significant changes in grassland management, particularly the move from single cut hay to multiple cut silage.

WHAT DO SKYLARK NEED?

Nesting habitat

Skylarks prefer large, open fields and tend to avoid tall structures such as woodland edges, or tall hedgerow trees. 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 have two or three successful nesting attempts between April and August to sustain the population. Spring-sown cereals are often good nesting habitat for skylarks, but winter wheat generally grows too tall and thick to enable more than a single brood. In grassland areas, silage fields attract skylarks, but are generally cut too frequently to allow successful breeding. However, unimproved,

extensively grazed grassland can hold very high densities of breeding skylark.

Summer food

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 the ground, and from low-growing plants in crop and pasture.

Winter food

Adults feed on seeds and sometimes leaves of crops and weeds. They are strongly associated with 'green' or weedy stubble.

ANNUAL LIFECYCLE

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Wintering flocks on seed rich areas	■	■	■									
Breeding pairs nest, multiple broods				1st brood	2nd brood	3rd brood						
Wintering flocks form on seed rich areas									■	■	■	■

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SKYLARK?

Nesting habitat and summer food

- Include spring cereals in the rotation to provide more accessible nesting and feeding habitat.
- In winter cereals, create skylark plots (small bare patches) either by switching the drill off during sowing or by spraying them out between crop emergence and the end of December. Two plots per hectare (approximately 20 m² each) in fields larger than five hectares can boost productivity by almost 50%.



Skylark plot in winter wheat

- Create tussocky grass margins around arable fields to create over-wintering habitat for beneficial insects, which move into the crops in the spring.
- Unimproved grasslands can be particularly

valuable. Minimise the amount of topping to maintain taller patches.

- Introduce arable crops on livestock farms (other than maize) to provide feeding and nesting habitat in pastoral areas.
- Make some areas of permanent grassland more skylark-friendly by shutting it up over the spring and early summer, or grazing it only very lightly during this period.

Winter food

- 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 desiccant and no post-harvest herbicides, and can be maintained until the end of the following March.
- Allow some strips or blocks of ryegrass to go to seed and leave uncut and ungrazed through the winter in areas away from hedgerows or woodland.

KEY POINTS

- Provide suitable nesting habitat on arable farms using spring cereals, or skylark plots in winter cereals
- Extensive grazing to maintain areas of taller vegetation can support nesting skylarks in pastoral areas

Contact Conservation Management Advice at:

Post: The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL

Tel: 01767 693308

E-mail: conservation-advice@rspb.org.uk

rspb.org.uk/conservationadvice