



*Conservation headlands at the field edge (above and left) are sprayed with fewer pesticides, and so contain wildflowers and other plants, which support insects that in turn provide food for wild bird chicks © Jen Brewin*

## 4. Habitat management

Managing game successfully means providing for the needs of the birds year-round, and to achieve this, the three-legged stool described earlier that was first identified for wild grey partridge (see page 42) has been applied in a broader fashion to game management. All gamebirds need:

1. Suitable habitat;
2. Enough food;
3. Tolerable levels of predation.

Shoot management that includes all three of these elements will not only support gamebirds, but have benefits for other wildlife. The standard shoot management approach of planting game cover crops, providing supplementary feed and performing predator control addresses these needs. Improvements benefiting gamebirds but also for other wildlife can always be made, and slight adjustments to the details of management (for example, what species to choose to provide foraging cover) can make all the difference. The Code of Good Shooting Practice recommends that shoot managers should prepare

an appropriate, whole shoot management plan to ensure positive environmental benefits from their activities.

### **The gamekeeper's role**

As well as organising shoot days and managing their gamebirds, from when they arrive on the shoot to when they go to the game dealer, the gamekeeper should be a working conservationist. Much of his or her time outside of shoot days is spent on activities which benefit not just the pheasants and partridges but a host of other wildlife. This fact is central to how the gamekeeping community sees itself, evidenced by the National Gamekeepers' Organisation motto "Keeping the Balance", which refers to enhancing biodiversity in the countryside. The guiding principle of "working conservation" is that wildlife can thrive alongside other land uses. The GWCT recognised that gamekeepers were the unexpected champions of this multiple outcomes approach as farming modernised to meet the post-war demand for food. It carefully studied how they began to use their range of techniques, to maintain their bird numbers without hindering farm production. Today these gamekeeping techniques are vital conservation tools because they support wildlife in a working countryside.



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The cost of employing a gamekeeper is taken on by the shoot. Therefore, the conservation benefits that come from their work contribute to the public good at no additional cost to the taxpayer. This chapter looks in detail at the wide range of conservation activities undertaken by keepers to better understand what goes on outside shoot days and the key role it plays in wildlife management.

### **The farmer's role**

The gamekeeper can only achieve a good habitat for his gamebirds and surrounding wildlife by working closely with the landowner, farmer and shoot manager. A range of jobs from drilling and maintaining game cover crops, to hedge maintenance and tree planting are often done by farm employees or contractors, so it is essential that the work schedule and any planting plans are agreed between the gamekeeping and farming operations. In many cases they will also make joint decisions on applications for agri-environment funding. In addition, the farm's commercial operations can impact game and wildlife on the shoot,

from crop rotations to spraying regimes. Therefore, for both shooting and conservation to work, co-operation between everyone involved is essential and the most successful wildlife restoration projects always have a good working relationship between the farmer and keeper at their heart.



*A good relationship with the farmer is essential to achieve a good habitat for gamebirds and other farmland wildlife. © GWCT*

## **Suitable habitat – the right environment**

Good habitat management is critical to gamebirds, and can also have a profound effect on the environment, with benefits for other wildlife. Planting and managing vegetation in such a way that it gives a suitable physical environment, or one that nurtures other resources such as a rich source of chick-food insects provides the habitat that gamebirds and other wildlife need to thrive.

Gamebirds need three types of habitat: foraging habitat, winter cover and, for wild birds, nesting cover. Some crops can provide for more than one of these needs at the same time.