

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.

What is a cover crop?

The term “cover crops” can be confusing, as it has two meanings – in farming, a cover crop is planted in winter to protect the soil from erosion, and improve nutrient retention, soil health and structure. In game management, it is an unharvested area planted for the benefit of game birds, providing food or shelter. For clarity, we use the term game cover crop in this book.

Typically planted in strips along the edge of fields or in blocks, for example between nesting habitat and farm crops, game cover crops provide food for the birds and protection from predators. Some also stand through the winter and give shelter from poor weather. Whichever game cover crop is chosen needs to have a suitable structure which can provide shelter from above but also allow ease of movement and foraging at ground level.

Farms with a significant pheasant interest typically plant 2-6% of their farmland with game cover crops. In some areas without pheasant releasing, crop diversity and the food and shelter available on farmland can be very limited. On estates managing for wild grey partridge, it is recommended that at least 7% of their land is under habitat management – this includes nesting cover, foraging cover and winter cover.



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**Follow
the Code**

Releasing key to conservation

“The release of reared birds is fundamental to British game shooting and its attendant conservation benefits.”



Game cover crops provide food and shelter from predators during the winter months.
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Game cover crops

Many species are available to use as game cover crops, and different ones offer different benefits and drawbacks. The best approach is usually a mix of several species, and we recommend that a shoot has a range of species, to provide a broad range of habitats for the gamebirds but also to benefit a wider range of other wildlife. This is a brief summary of the main points about some of the commonly used crops.

Maize

A reliable crop for holding game, which allows good control of broad-leaved weeds, so can be useful in a cover crop rotation. However, maize has several disadvantages. It can attract rats and badgers and dies down by Christmas so does not provide cover later in the winter. It also has very limited benefits for birds and other wildlife, so is not funded in agri-environment schemes.



Sorghum/dwarf grain sorghum

Sorghum can also be kept clear of broad-leaved weeds, and does not have cobs so is unattractive to rats. Some varieties of dwarf sorghum produce seed heads and they stand well throughout the winter. However, most varieties have no feed value, so hopper feeding will also be required. Sorghums do not like cold, wet summers.



Millet

Millet is a fantastic addition to any cover crop mix as gamebirds and small birds love the seed. Red millet ripens and sheds seed first, so is good for partridge cover. White millet seed lasts in the head much longer and can still be available to eat in January. A mix can provide seeds through the winter. Millet does not like heavy, wet soils.



Kale

Grown well, kale is the king of game cover crops – especially if it is left into a second year. It provides warm cover, is very hardy and produces stacks of small seeds that many birds love to eat. Great to include in a mix, and is economic as it lasts for two years. But it can be difficult to establish.



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Triticale

Triticale is a hybrid wheat/rye crop which stands right through the winter – only heavy snow knocks it over, so it offers a good food supply well into the new year for a wide range of birds. It grows well on poor ground, does not need much nutrient to thrive and is excellent to use as part of a mix. Rabbits, hares and deer don't like to eat it when it is growing. But it can attract rats, rooks and pigeons.

Quinoa

Quinoa is easy to grow and ideal to plant as part of a mix, as it provides a good amount of nutritious seed. However, it does not offer much cover and little remains of the crop by January.

Sunflowers

Offers a wonderful sight through until the autumn and produces stacks of seed, which game and small birds love to eat. Consider the dwarf, multi-headed varieties. It does not offer much cover, so should be included as part of a mix with other crops that provide warmth.

Fodder radish

A fast-growing crop, which is ideal to include within a mix. The pods are slow to ripen, so seeds are not eaten until late in the year when many other seeds have gone. The seed is loved by many bird species. However, it can become too much of a good thing if too high a seed rate is used, dominating other species in the mix.

Take advice in designing a range of cover crops to provide for the needs of the birds year-round. This is available from the GWCT Advisory Department.



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Did you know?

One study looking at game crops in Scotland recorded up to 100 times as many songbirds per hectare in game cover crops, compared to set-aside, stubble or conventional crops. Another study showed 15 times more butterflies and 40 times more bumblebees.

