



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Arable Margins

Updated October 2007



Arable field margins

National lead organisation(s):
Defra

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire County Council

Arable field margins are strips of land lying between an arable crop and the field boundary, extend for a limited distance into the crop and are deliberately managed to create conditions that benefit key farmland species.

Current status

National status

Approximately 41% of the British landscape is tilled (44% in England), of which cereals alone comprise 51% (Joint Nature Conservation Committee 2006). Much of the wildlife interest in arable areas is now found at the field edges or headlands. Some species that were once considered to be problem weeds are now among Britain's rarest plants.

Local status

There is little known about arable field margins themselves in Bedfordshire but approximately 65% of land in Bedfordshire is classified as arable (79,000 ha). Arable or cereal field margins can support many rare or endangered plant species such as corn parsley, field cow-wheat and shepherd's-needle. Margins can also provide habitats for insects and mammals, and declining bird species such as corn bunting, lapwing and grey partridge.

Current factors affecting arable margins

- Intensification of crop production, including the use of herbicides to ensure a weed-free monoculture, and summer use of insecticides
- The shift to winter cropping and the associated loss of stubbles
- The reduction in rotation of cereal crops and other land covers (including grass leys and fallows)
- The reduction in the undersown area associated with the shift to winter cropping





Current action

Management

The Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) replaced the Countryside Stewardship Scheme in 2005. ELS will pay participating farmers for managing, restoring and improving existing field margins, and for creating new ones. Through its Entry Level, Higher Level and Organic Entry Level Schemes, ELS stands to deliver much of the national target for field margins and other farmland habitats.

Advisory services

Advice on the management of arable field margins, management for particular species and potential sources of funding is available from the following organisations:

- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
- National Farmers Union (NFU)
- Defra
- The Wildlife Trust
- Countryside management projects: The Greensand Trust, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Forest of Marston Vale (for farmers within the Marston Vale area)
- Chilterns Conservation Board
- Country Landowners Association (CLA)
- RSPB
- Local authorities

Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

Maintain and where possible expand the range of arable field margins in Bedfordshire

Maintain and where possible improve the condition of existing arable field margins in Bedfordshire

Targets

- A. Maintain and if appropriate expand by 2015 the 2006 area of 15 ha of cultivated, low-input field margins (ELS options EF9, EF10, EF11, HLS options HF9, HF10, HF11 HF14, HF19, HF20)
- B. Maintain and if appropriate expand by 2015 the 2006 area of 49 ha of margins providing wild bird seed (ELS options EF2, EF3, HLS option HF12)
- C. Maintain and if appropriate expand by 2015 the 2006 area of 31 ha of flower-rich field margins which provide a pollen and nectar source (ELS option EF4, HLS option HE10)
- D. Maintain and if appropriate expand by 2015 the 2006 area of 367 ha permanent grass margins (ELS options EE1-EE6)





E. Achieve favourable condition on an increasing proportion of the resource of arable field margins by 2015



Proposed action

Abbreviations

| | | | |
|------|--|------|-----------------------|
| BCC | Bedfordshire County Council | LBAP | Local BAP Coordinator |
| CWS | Bedfordshire & Luton County Wildlife Sites Panel | NE | Natural England |
| FWAG | Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group | | |

| Action | Implemented by |
|---|-----------------------|
| Policy and legislation | |
| 1. Establish by 2010 a set of criteria for designating County Wildlife Site arable margins | CWS |
| Advisory | |
| 2. Conduct for farmers and other landowners at least one seminar annually to promote the benefits and encourage uptake of environmental stewardship options for arable margins | FWAG |
| 3. By 2012 conduct a targeted farm visit programme in areas of focus established through actions 4, 5 and 6, to provide advice and information where needed and encourage appropriate ELS or HLS option uptake for arable margins | FWAG |
| 4. Promote to Natural England areas of focus established through actions 4, 5 and 6, and work closely with Natural England to increase positive stewardship in target areas | FWAG, NE LBAP, BCC |
| Future research and monitoring | |
| 5. By 2010 use information on the distribution of farmland birds and important arable plant areas to establish areas of focus for expanding areas of cultivated, low-input field margins | FWAG, BCC |
| 6. By 2008 assess the distribution within Bedfordshire and Luton of seed-eating birds. Using this information, establish by 2009 areas of focus for establishing margins providing wild bird seed | FWAG, BCC |
| 7. By 2008 assess the distribution within Bedfordshire and Luton of butterfly and bumblebee pollinators. Using this information, establish by 2009 areas of focus for establishing margins providing pollen and nectar sources | FWAG, BCC |



Communication and publicity

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| 8. Write and submit for publication in trade magazines at least one article annually on arable margin management | FWAG LBAP, BCC |
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Monitoring the Action Plan

This Biodiversity Action Plan will be monitored and reviewed by the BAP Coordinator and FWAG every five years

Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for arable field margins.

Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire have also written action plans for arable field margins.

This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton habitat action plans, in particular those for lowland meadows, woodland, hedgerows and arable plants. The plan also links to several Bedfordshire and Luton species action plans, in particular arable plants and farmland birds.

Acknowledgements

The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the Biodiversity Partnership Coordinator have compiled this action plan. For more information please contact the Biodiversity Partnership Coordinator; contact details are available at www.bedslife.org.uk.

References

Joint Nature Conservation Committee. 2006. UK Biodiversity Action Plan: habitat action plan – cereal field margins. [ONLINE] <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=8>. Accessed 2007 August 13.

