

Cereal Field Margins

Cereal field margins provide valuable habitat for a wide range of animals and plants. Up to 75% of the biodiversity within an arable field can be found in the margins, regardless of the farming practice. Swings in cropping practice and underlying changes through farming reform and the agri-environment review all have the potential to alter this habitat, either positively or negatively.



1 Definition

This Action Plan recognises the term ‘Cereal field margin’ as referring to the land lying between a cereal crop and the field boundary. This area can be cropped, left fallow or managed as a temporary grassland habitat or a more permanent tussocky grassland strip.

Sympathetically managed cereal field margins can provide nesting and feeding sites for birds and is also an important habitat for invertebrates and small mammals. In turn mammals may be predated upon by owls and raptors. Where a tussocky growth can be allowed to develop bumblebees may find suitable sites to develop colonies, amphibians and bats can benefit from the extra habitat to buffer and link water bodies. Changes in farming practice and the increasing effectiveness of herbicides has meant that some arable plants are now found mostly within the margins of arable crops. Rare arable plants found within cereal field margins include Cornflower, Corn Parsley, Red-tipped Cudweed, Shepherd’s Needle, Spreading-hedge Parsley and Narrow-fruited Corn Salad.

Key National Biodiversity Action Plan species in Suffolk which use Cereal field margins are Brown Hare, Skylark, Grey Partridge, Song Thrush, Linnet and Corn Bunting.

2 Current Status

2.1 Suffolk

The area that can be identified under this habitat is subject to fluctuation, not only through cropping swings but also between autumn and spring plantings, thus no reliable figures are available. Nationally the habitat is also thought to be under threat due to changes in farming practices.

2.2 Natural Areas

All (East Anglian Chalk, The Fens, The Brecklands, East Anglian Plain, Suffolk Coast and Heaths, The Broads).

3 Current factors affecting cereal field margins in Suffolk

Some of these factors are especially important on the lighter soils in east Suffolk.

- Availability of grant funded margin management through Defra Agri-environment schemes.
- Large scale farming reform through the CAP .

Reduction in rotation of cereal crops with other land covers eg; grass leys and fallows. For example;

- Increased cane sugar imports causing a contraction of the UK sugar beet hectareage. [Sugar beet is often followed by a spring sown cereal].
- Continued volatility of the malting market leading to a reduction in plantings of barley.
- Increase in alternative crops such as turf, outdoor pigs and vegetables which provide greater returns than cereals.
- Shift to winter cropping and associated loss of winter stubbles.
- Potential to “trade” set aside between holdings (possibility for less productive land to be placed under “semi-permanent” set aside).
- Continued sympathetic management of field margins to recognise Local Reduction in the Application of Pesticides (LERAP), Nitrate vulnerable zone (NVZ) obligations.

4 Current Action

Appropriate management is key to the success of this habitat. All cereal field margins offer a degree of biodiversity, those offering a high biodiversity benefit can be identified as follows:

- Defra agri-environment scheme grass margins, particularly where a six metre strip is managed with an un-managed tussocky portion.
- Set aside sited as boundary strip.
- Conservation headlands managed within the crop through reduced inputs.
- Game cover, wildlife seed-mixture or pollen and nectar strips or plots adjacent to the field boundary. These strips can be grant aided although not for ordinary game cover.
- Field boundaries managed through a shallow annual cultivation to promote populations of arable plants.

5 Action Plan Objectives and Targets

1. *Continue promotion of appropriate management, taking into account the species present*
2. *Recognise the value of soil type, particularly with regard to maintaining populations of declining arable plants through annual cultivation techniques.*
3. *Encourage examination of crop management techniques favouring biodiversity. [New generation seed treatments / varietal resistance]*
4. *Ensure farmers, land managers and their agronomic advisers recognise the importance of Habitat Action Plans, particularly with regard to species associated with them.*
5. *Promote the adoption of a user-friendly guide to farmland biodiversity, easily accessible to farmers, land owners and their advisers, emphasising the link between BAP species and habitats and Agri-environment schemes.*

6 Cereal Field Margins: Proposed local action with lead agencies

Action	Date	Partners
POLICY AND LEGISLATION		
Ensure partners input fully into review of Defra Agri-environment schemes to ensure that the new schemes can properly address the management requirements of this habitat in Suffolk.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG, RSPB, SWT, EN
SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT		
Support and promote uptake of Defra agri-environment Schemes to encourage appropriate management for cereal field margins	2004 2005 2006 2007	Defra, RDS
RESEARCH AND MONITORING		
Collect data on appropriate species on different soil types so that there can be better targetting focussed on natural areas and pass all data to SBRC	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG, SWT, EN, RSPB
Produce data on the hectarage of field margins managed through Defra agri-environment schemes (where information is available for the County)	2004 2005 2006 2007	Defra
ADVISORY		
Continue to promote appropriate management through on-farm events	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG
Ensure ‘Defra first visit’ facility through FWAG is available to all farmers / landowners as required.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG
Provide annual training courses encouraging farmers and agronomists to recognise a wide variety of biodiversity, particularly targetted courses such as Farmland Birds.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG

COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY		
Produce easily accessible, user-friendly farmland biodiversity guide.	2004	Farmland HWG
Promote to landowners the benefits of favourable margin management through a variety of means including mail shots, press articles, training courses and farm walks – especially in areas where alternative crops are on the increase.	2004 2005 2006 2007	FWAG , Defra, RSPB, EN, SWT