Farmers providing a giant bird-table

A few acres of the right crops can support bird numbers and diversity

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A bird’s beak indicates its food source. Birds of prey, such as owls and hen harriers, have a hooked beak to kill and feed on small mammals and other birds. Seeding waders, such as curlew and lapwing, have long beaks to probe deep into soft wet ground. Insect eaters like the wren and dunnock have a fine beak. Seed-eating birds have short strong beaks to break open seeds. As specialists, birds suffer if their particular food source is in short supply.

With the reduction in mixed farming, winter stubbles and the absence of tillage crops from many areas, there is a shortage of seed during the winter. The purpose of growing wild bird cover crops is to provide seed for such birds during the winter when demand is highest. Approximately 12,000 farmers are growing 20,000ha under GLAS. Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCC) is an assessment of the conservation status of all regularly occurring birds on the island of Ireland. The conservation status of species is signalled using a traffic light system. Of the 202 species assessed, 37 were placed on the Red list, 91 on the Amber list and 74 on the Green list.

Small seed eaters
- Skylark: is Amber-listed. Known as the lark it was well-loved in Ireland for its beautiful song, which on first hearing heralded the arrival of spring. If the lark sang on St Brigid’s Day, it was an omen for a good spring. Early risers were ‘up with the lark’. Skylark like open areas and build grass nests on the ground. It likes small seed such as kale and linseed.
- Linnet: is also Amber-listed. It is a long-tailed finch that likes open areas and nests in small trees. Their jerky bounding flight action makes it difficult to see their plumage. The finches have a beak suited to small seeds only.
- Twite: is Red-listed. It has declined by 78% since the 1970s. It is found in Donegal and Mayo and there is a specific-twite measure in GLAS. Twite like seed from dandelion, sorrel, catsear and yellow rattle.

Large and small seed eaters
- Yellowhammer is Red-listed. It was a member of the bunting family as was the corn bunting which has become extinct in Ireland. Yellowhammer is now mainly found in the eastern half of Ireland. It prefers cereal and nests on or near the ground under hedge vegetation.
- Reed bunting is on the Green list. It is widely distributed, present in all counties. It eats all seeds especially oilseed rape and kale.
- Tree sparrow is Amber-listed. It is smaller than the house sparrow, but makes the same chattering call from a group in a hedge or tree. They nest in colonies inside holes in trees or banks.
- Twite

To cater for all tastes, the GLAS wild bird cover seed mix must contain a large seed (oats, barley, wheat or triticale) and a small seed (oilseed rape, linseed, mustard or kale). An unharvested crop is a giant bird table, provided seed is produced. Broad-leaved ‘weeds’ in these crops are beneficial, as long as they don’t smother out the crop. They provide flowers for bees and a choice of smaller seed for birds. Weedy crops are also full of insects, which provide food for other insect-eating birds such as the swallow and great tit, as well as bats. Beneath the wild bird cover on the ground, birds such as the blackbird and song thrush find earthworms easily, provided the crop is not too dense to access.

An open crop is required, so the seeding rate is much lower than that for normal crops. The crop is an ideal habitat for shrews and field mice, which in turn attract owls and kestrel.

The most common mix includes linseed and a cereal. While both are sown throughout the field or plot, it is preferable to sow each seed type separately, because large and small seed need different sowing depths. As kale is a biennial crop, which is
vegetative in the first year and flowers and produces seed in the second year, only half of the field or plot can be sown with kale.

To grow kale, the soil needs to have a high pH, and lime and fertiliser are required.

Animal access now may help decomposition. Pre-sowing weed control is recommended if noxious weeds are present or if vegetation growth will make cultivations difficult.

Any cultivation method is allowed, provided a fine, firm seedbed is achieved. Fertilise at half rate – it may be useful to mix the fertiliser with the seed to help dispersal if broadcasting. Harrow after broadcasting cereal to cover the larger seed. Broadcast smaller linseed separately and roll. Rolling after sowing increases seed contact with the soil, allowing moisture uptake and facilitating germination. Getting the seedbed right is the key: Fine, firm and fertile are the three words to remember.

Do not apply pesticides after sowing, but spot treat noxious weeds such as ragwort, thistles and docks. Keep the fence stockproof and fit for purpose. The wild bird cover must be grown in the same field or plot for the length of GLAS. Sow by 31 May, unless there is an area of second-year kale.

Over time, your actions will support bird populations. To see more of these birds, most of which were so common when we were all much younger, will be truly satisfying.