

# ENVIRONMENT

April 2023

## AGRES dates for your diary

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- From March 15 to July 1: no topping or mowing of extensively grazed pasture;
- by May 15, 2023: in grass fields – fence grass margins, and riparian strips and zones;
- by August 31, 2023: in tillage fields – fence grass margins, and riparian strips and zones;
- by May 15 each year: establish winter bird food crops;
- by July 31, 2023: erect barn owl box; and,
- by March 31, 2024: plant hedges, trees and traditional orchards.

When planning hedges, the most important consideration is whether you are going to plant a topped hedge or an escaped hedge. If planting trees and hedges this spring, do so before the end of the dormant season when

buds burst open and leaves begin to grow. Plants purchased must have an accompanying plant passport showing they are of Irish origin or Irish provenance, which must be retained for the duration of the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) contract.



*When planning hedges, decide if you are going to plant a topped hedge or an escaped hedge.*

## Extensively grazed pasture



*Watercourses should be fenced off from bovines.*

Extensively grazed pasture offers €250/ha/year and carries the following requirements:

- must be a grazing enterprise of owned livestock;
  - no ploughing, cultivation, reseeding or drainage;
  - no mowing or topping between March 15 and July 1;
  - maximum nitrogen (N) application is 40kg N/ha (organic or chemical);
  - no pesticides or herbicides (except spot spraying of noxious weeds or invasive alien species);
  - rushes can be controlled by topping, grazing, weed wiping or spot spraying after July 1;
  - where no natural barrier exists, any watercourse present must be fenced at least 1.5m from the top of the bank when bovines are present (drinking points are not permitted);
  - do not cut hedges below 1.8m – escaped hedges should be side trimmed only – there is no requirement to cut hedges in ACRES; and,
  - no silage feeding is allowed. Hay may be fed to sheep.
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## Grass margins in grass fields



House sparrow. Credit: Michael Finn.



Small tortoiseshell butterfly.

Grass margins provide corridors of movement and networks for nature through the countryside, as well as habitats of high biodiversity value. Good structure is as important as species present. Lumpy and bumpy is good for associated invertebrates. Management which allows grasses and broadleaved plants to go to seed allows them to regenerate, and provides flowers and seed for bees and birds:

- create a grass margin by May 15, 2023 by erecting a permanent stock-proof fence either two, three, or six metres out from the field boundary – as selected in your ACRES application;
- to create a grass litter layer, you cannot cut or graze the margin between May 15, 2023 and August 31, 2024;
- from 2024 onwards you must cut the margin between September and February, but not below 10cm to ensure the litter layer is retained – alternatively, margins may be managed by grazing, but this can only take place during September and ensure that no poaching occurs, and that the litter layer remains;
- chemical or organic fertiliser or lime cannot be applied to the margin;
- pesticides and herbicides are not permitted, except for the spot treatment of noxious/invasive weeds;
- margins must be stock proof and fenced with permanent stakes and wire appropriate for the livestock type; and,
- the margin(s) must remain in the same location for the duration of the contract.



Greater bird's-foot trefoil.

## Barn owl nest box



Interior barn owl nest box. Credit: John Lusby.



Exterior barn owl nest box.

When installing a barn owl nest box, you must adhere to the following:

- nest boxes must be located as on the ACRES application;
- maintain in the same position for five years;
- place nest boxes at least 3m above ground level;
- barn owl/kestrel nest boxes can be placed indoors or outdoors and therefore must be of suitable design informed by the location(s) selected;
- if rodenticides are used, you must implement an integrated pest management approach to rodent control on your farm – the use of rodenticides must be justified and be in accordance with the product label – maintain records regarding their use;
- while barn owl nest box(es) must not be located within 500m of a motorway or dual carriageway and must be below 300m in altitude (altitude above sea level), this does not apply to kestrel boxes;
- once in place, do not approach the nest box(es). It is an offence to cause disturbance to a breeding pair or at the nest site. Essential maintenance is permitted during the month of December only.



Barn owl. Credit: Mike Brown.