

Information note

Managing nest plots for stone-curlews

The stone-curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus* is a ground-nesting bird that nests on open stony ground with sparse or short vegetation. This may include fallow land or spring-sown crops on arable farmland.

Declines in stone-curlew numbers during the 20th century were largely due to the loss or agricultural improvement of semi-natural grassland habitats, the switch from spring to autumn-sowing of arable crops and the loss of fallow land.

Nests and chicks are vulnerable to destruction by farming operations as they are highly camouflaged and chicks will freeze low to the ground rather than run away from machinery.

In order to provide safe, suitable nesting habitat for stone-curlews, the RSPB and Natural England, in collaboration with farmers and landowners, have been working to create a network of fallow nest plots.



Ian Grier

Stone-curlew eggs in a nest scrape on a plot

How to create plots

Various cultivation techniques can be used to create a lightly undulating tilth. The best results for stone-curlews are achieved by using a spring tine cultivator, discs, cultivator with a press (not a pack roller or flexi-coil) or a plough with press. Spraying is a possible alternative, but this does not necessarily create suitable bare patches or the lightly undulating surface, and it also reduces the availability of invertebrate food.

Where to put plots

The most successful plots are generally 2ha in size and located in level or slightly sloping fields with an open aspect, away from sources of disturbance. Guidance on plot locations can be found in Natural England's Countryside Stewardship prescription notes. For advice on establishing or relocating a plot, please contact the RSPB on the number overleaf.

- Ideally the plot location should remain fixed, as stone-curlew are site faithful. However if the plot needs to be rotated to fit with the farming system it must remain in situ until 30th September.
- Livestock should be fenced out of the plot using a temporary fence, as permanent fencing provides fence posts for avian predators to perch on.
- 2-6m grass buffers should be located around the edge of the plot. These provide shelter and a foraging area for the birds. They also protect important arable plants on the plot from spray drift.

What to do

1. **By 15th March, prepare the whole plot** *by discing/ light cultivation, ideally in February.*

This creates a rough bare fallow that provides suitable conditions for the first stone-curlew nesting attempt. Management in February will benefit lapwing, as they nest slightly earlier.

2. **During May spray one half of the plot using a non-selective herbicide** *ideally when the vegetation is no more than a few centimetres tall.*

This will create bare ground rather than a mat of dead vegetation. Spraying reduces the risk associated with management to a level that will not impact the population. The only danger to stone-curlew nests/chicks is from tractor wheels. By only spraying half, this risk is further reduced and provides some cover for chicks, as well as protecting important arable plants.

3. **Retain the fallow through the autumn/winter** *at least until 30th September.*

Stone-curlews can nest late into the year so the fallow must be left until the end of September. If left through winter it will provide a vital source of seeds for farmland birds.

If your farm is organic and you are unable to carry out Step 2, please contact the team if you suspect there to be nesting stone-curlew (or lapwing) which may be vulnerable to plot management or other agricultural operations.



Nick Tomalin

Stone-curlew plot in an arable field

Stone-curlew plots benefit a range of other farmland wildlife. Lapwing will often nest on stone-curlew plots during the early season, and if left fallow through the winter, the plot will provide seed food for finches and buntings. Additionally, plots can be of benefit to a wide range of rare arable plants, brown hare and a host of beneficial invertebrate species, such as bumblebees and ground beetles.

Contact us

If you have any queries about the plot management advice given, or for more information, please contact the RSPB stone-curlew team by emailing robert.blackler@rspb.org.uk or calling 07834 792856.

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