

Guide to new and tricky farmland habitats

Please use this with the original habitat guide for the survey

There have been a lot of changes in farming in recent years and you may not recognise some of the habitats, particularly the crops or crop mixtures, that are out there. The habitat categories on our form are also, necessarily, simplifications of what you will actually find, so that it is not obvious how we want you to record things. Field categories will change over the winter as crops grow or are ploughed in. Photos and tips below come from real survey squares in October 2025 and should help with confusing situations. **If in doubt, a general principle is that we are interested in variations that will affect birds, not necessarily in accurate identifications.**

Habitats not listed are expected to be identified in BBS habitat recording from the spring and not to change, so do not need recording now.

This guide will be updated through the winter as more habitats are found and photographed.

HEDGEROWS

What is a hedge(row)? Please tick the hedge box if a solid line of bushes runs along the majority of your transect section. There may or may not also be trees in the hedge and it does not matter what is on the other side – fields, roads, gardens, etc., but please do not record the edges of woodland or scrub as 'hedgerow'.

In winter, the important thing with hedges is whether they *have* been managed to promote berry crops or trimmed back hard, or naturally have no berries. Please assess whether there are significant berries along the transect and tick 'with berries' if so. It is unlikely that there will be no berries at all, but the odd rosehip bush, for example, does not count. There will also always be parts of the hedge with no berries and parts with berries. If there are a lot of the latter, please tick 'with berries'. Likewise, a hedge along one side of your route might have berries and one along the other side might not. In this case, tick 'with berries'. Berries can be rosehips, hawthorns, blackthorns, sloes, ivy, blackberries, etc.: all are food for birds, but if they are dried and 'gone over', please do not count them (birds won't eat them).

Please do not worry too much about whether it is a 'real hedge' or has enough berries: there is bound to be subjectivity in this and we cannot foresee all situations. Please just use your best instincts.

- If there are hedgerows with berries along most of the transect section, tick 'with berries'
- If not, but there are still hedgerows and only a few bushes with berries, then tick 'without berries'
- If there are no hedgerows, tick 'no hedgerow'

Some examples are shown below.

Hawthorn with berries:



Hawthorn and dogwood with berries:



Hedge with berries (rosehips and hawthorn):



Hedge with berries (hawthorn), growing out:



Untidy hedge with berries (hawthorn and sloe):



Trimmed hedge – but still with berries:



Trimmed hedge without berries:



Untrimmed hedge without berries:



Bramble-dominated hedge with dead/gone-over berries – record as hedgerow without berries:



Scrubby boundary vegetation – record as no hedgerow:



Isolated hawthorn with berries, but no hedge – record as no hedgerow:



Trimmed hedge with trees and no berries:



Recently cut hedge – record as hedgerow without berries:



Recently cut hedge – record as hedgerow without berries:



Isolated hawthorn bush in a fence line – record as no hedgerow:



Young and recently cut hedge – record as hedgerow without berries:



Scattered bushes in a fence line – record as no hedgerow:



Sparse and thin, but managed, hedge – record as hedgerow without berries:



Hedgerow without berries along part of a field boundary - whether to record this as hedgerow depends on where the transect section finishes:



CROPS

Most confusion will be with arable crops. Pasture is either grazed, i.e. has livestock on it at the time, or ungrazed (NB it is common for animals to be taken indoors in winter and this might have happened the day before your visit). This is important particularly because livestock and their dung support insects that can support insectivorous birds in winter. NB livestock may be present on an early visit (grazed field), but not later (then an ungrazed field).

Please note that some arable cereal crops can look like grass in winter – look for lines suggesting recent sowing.

We want you to record stubble fields because they are important food sources for seed-eating birds. If they have green vegetation (crop volunteers or weeds), they have not been sprayed and are likely to have more seed for birds. If they are brown, they are quite sterile.

Among crops, there are standard types that may be familiar, like cereals, sugar beet and oilseed rape, but there may also be new types like multispecies cover crops, bioenergy crops and vineyards. Of course, fields may also be bare and *ploughed* or *tilled*.

There are also confusing combinations, such as (green) cover crops being sown into stubble fields without any ploughing or tillage (they are 'direct-drilled'), and it is becoming increasingly common to use minimum tillage ('min till'), which just scratches the soil surface, such that crops come up in between the dead stubble stalks of the previous crop.

Examples of different crops and what to record them (or things like them) as are shown below.

'Traditional' crops

Bare till (note fine lines showing where seeds have been sown):



Newly sown (young) autumn cereal crop:



Oilseed rape crop (well-established, but still 'young'):



Mature sugar beet (clean):



Mature Sugar beet (weedy – as is common):



Pasture (grazed with sheep):



Autumn-harvested carrot crop (low but quite mature) – record as ‘mature broad-leaved crop’:



Close-up of carrot plants:



Grassy fallow (uncropped for more than one year):



Stubbles, cover crops and green manures

Sprayed, clean cereal stubble (no vegetation):



Maize stubble:



Weedy, green stubble (i.e. with vegetation):



Green stubble (less weedy, but still with vegetation):



Cereal stubble with sparse mustard cover crop and some weeds – record as stubble with green vegetation:



Weedy green stubble sown with a brassica – record as green stubble:



Sprayed stubble with a cover crop, no weeds – record as young broad-leaved crop:



Tilled field with a cereal summer cover crop that has been sprayed off (yellow) and freshly sown grass margin buffer strip – record as young cereal crop:



Mature *Phacelia* green manure crop – record as green manure/fodder crop:



Close up of *Phacelia* (lilac flower) sown in stubble:



Mature *Phacelia* green manure crop sown into a stubble field – record as green manure/fodder crop:



Close up of young *Phacelia* sown in stubble:



Minimum tillage ('min till')

Min till field, ex-cereal, unsown – record as bare plough:



Min till field, ex-cereal, unsown – record as bare plough:



Min till field, ex-maize, unsown – record as bare plough:



Min till field, ex-cereal, sown with rape – record as bare till:



Same field, on close inspection, has rape seedlings – probably record as young oilseed rape crop on subsequent visits:



BIRD SEED MIX AND GAME COVERS

Bird seed mix crops are sown under agri-environment schemes to provide seed for native species, but can also be used by shoots as game covers. 'Classical' game covers tend to be dominated by maize, but can have other crops in them. These are all usually sown as strips along field edges. We are only asking you to distinguish between strips that have maize in them or do not. Please note that the term 'cover crop' can be used for game cover strips, or for crops sown to protect soil over winter. We are using it to describe the latter – cover for soil – as described above, with 'game covers' for covers for gamebirds.

Some examples are shown below.

Maize game cover – record as seed mix/game strip with maize:



Game cover sown with *Miscanthus* grass – record as seed mix/game strip with maize:



AES Wild Bird Seed Mix plot with sunflower, fodder radish and mustard – record as seed mix/game strip without maize:



AES Wild Bird Seed Mix plot with quinoa and cereal, etc. – record as seed mix/game strip without maize:



AES Wild Bird Seed Mix plot with red and yellow millet, quinoa, etc. – record as seed mix/game strip without maize:



Two different AES Wild Bird Seed Mixes sown next to each other – record as seed mix/game strip without maize:



Grown-out Nectar Flower Mix (provided for pollinators) – record as fallow:



WACKY AND UNUSUAL 'CROPS'

There are bound to be things that we have not thought of! Please take photos and ask, but recording in what feels like the closest category on our form, based on likely value for birds, will not be wrong!

Paulownia trees – very fast growing (3-4 years old here) – behind a deer fence – no habitat record needed:



Newly sown herbal ley (young grass and broadleaf plants visible) – record as green manure/fodder crop:



Free-range turkey enclosure – record as livestock – other/poultry:



Photos by Gavin Siriwardena and James Heywood, October 2025