

Cereal Headlands

Cereal or Conservation headlands encourage the growth of arable plants within the cropped area. Turning off or even just reducing sprays along crop margins can reveal arable species long thought lost, as well as increasing the numbers of beneficial insects, nectar sources and improving feeding opportunities for farmland birds, such as Grey Partridge.

Where should cereal headlands be located?

Cereal headlands, also known as conservation headlands, can be established in any arable crop. For ease of management make them as wide as the boom width on sprayers, so usually between the edge of the crop and the first tramline. This usually creates a minimum width of 6 metres. Any multiple of this will be beneficial for arable plants, invertebrates, farmland birds and small mammals.

The presence of priority species is a clear indicator of where best to place conservation

Habitat for arable plants ★★★★★

Habitat for farmland birds ★★★★★

Habitat for invertebrates ★★★★★

Habitat for small mammals ★★★★★

headlands on a farm, and even within a field, but other aspects such as soil type, nutrients and depth should also be taken into account. It is best not to locate cereal headlands in areas where there is a known problem weed burden, such as cleavers, black grass, wild oats and sowthistles, as this will not benefit the rarer plant species, and may lead to further necessary control, such as the use of herbicides.

For multiple benefits, aim to locate cereal headlands adjacent to other conservation features, such as beetle banks or hedgerows, linking together important habitats for a range of wildlife.



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What benefits will cereal headlands deliver?

The aim of cereal headlands is to create an open cereal habitat allowing space for arable plants, farmland birds and small mammals and associated invertebrates to thrive. Although this management is applicable to some species of arable plants such as Corn Buttercup and Shepherd’s-needle, there are others that prefer very open habitat and would not be suited to this management such as Red Hemp-nettle.

Conservation headlands are prepared and drilled exactly as the crop, the difference in management is based around applications. Unlike the rest of the cropped area, the headlands do not receive applications of fertiliser or manures. Ideally pesticides and herbicides are also avoided as these have a detrimental impact on arable wildlife. If it is necessary to apply insecticides, they should not be used after mid-March and any herbicide application should be selective to control problem species.

Management of cereal headlands

Moving cereal headlands around the farm, as part of a crop rotation, allows management to control problem species. It can also be used to reduce the risk of a problem build-up. Targeted herbicides should be used, but may be restricted if this management is undertaken as part of an agri-environment scheme.

Come harvest time, conservation headlands can either be combined along with rest of the crop or left standing to allow arable plants to set seed and provide an over winter food source for farmland wildlife, particularly birds and small mammals. This approach works well when a spring sown crop is followed in the rotation.



Corn marigold in a spring cultivated cereal headland © Cath Shellswell