



Helping your local Turtle Doves

Conservation Advice from Operation Turtle Dove

This advice is principally aimed at farmers and those managing agricultural land but can be used by other land managers.

The Turtle Dove is a migratory bird wintering in West Africa and returning to Europe in spring to breed. Numbers have declined dramatically in the UK and across Europe, but there is real hope for recovery. With the issue of unsustainable hunting on the Turtle Dove's migratory flyway in western Europe being addressed, providing good quality habitat for UK breeding Turtle Doves is now a priority. As a farmer or land manager, you can help by following this guidance to ensure you are 'Turtle Dove Ready'.



Credit: Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

What do Turtle Doves need?

Turtle Doves require three key breeding season resources:

- 1. Food:** Turtle Doves feed on the ground, almost entirely on seeds of low growing wild plants or spilt crop seeds. They need sparse vegetation and or patches of open ground to be able to find the seeds. The past decline of Turtle Doves has been so serious that in addition to growing seed-bearing plants we recommend supplementary feeding, particularly early in the breeding season, when naturally occurring seeds are scarce. This can be done with a specially-designed seed mix to provide an additional food source,
- 2. Nesting habitat:** dense woody vegetation, particularly tall, dense thorny broadleaved scrub or tall, wide hedgerows.
- 3. Accessible water:** such as a well-managed pond, ditches, puddles and shallow troughs with suitable access for Turtle Doves.

How can I help?

Turtle Doves are now mainly restricted to eastern and south-eastern England. If you're based in one of these regions, you can help.

Protecting and creating places for Turtle Doves to feed, nest and drink is vital. Evidence clearly shows that restoring these lost resources in our countryside is the number one priority action for Turtle Doves in the UK.



Credit: Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Dense hedges and broadleaved thorny scrub provide suitable nesting habitat for Turtle Doves.

Collaborating with others

Your area might have one or more of the key resources that Turtle Doves need already. Consider what is missing and look to see where gaps can be filled. Can you work with others within your local area to give Turtle Doves places to feed, nest and drink?



Credit: Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Advisors can help provide locally-tailored guidance

With your help, we can make sure that when Turtle Doves return to the UK in spring they are met with the breeding sites, food and water that they need. The following guidance provides information on how key features can be created or maintained.

The Operation Turtle Dove partnership, your local Natural England or [RSPB advisor](#) can help to provide locally relevant guidance for all of these measures.

Help Turtle Doves – help wildlife

Providing any of the features listed in this note will benefit other wildlife, including plants, butterflies, bees, mammals and other birds.

Providing nesting habitat

In the UK, Turtle Doves usually nest in tall, wide mature scrub or hedgerows, especially if they contain standard trees, thorny shrubs and climbers. Dense thorny vegetation provides the birds with a safe place to build their nest, which is often just a small collection of twigs. Dense thorny scrub benefits lots of wildlife – from birds like Nightingales and Bullfinches to butterflies and other invertebrates.

Protect what's there already

- If you already have scrubby areas and hedgerows in your local landscape then you hold a vital resource for Turtle Doves.
- Good Turtle Dove nesting habitat can take a long time to develop from scratch, so it is essential to protect what's there already. Think about how you can help your neighbours to protect hedgerows and scrubby areas in your local landscape.

Management

To provide the dense scrubby structure that's ideal nesting habitat for Turtle Doves, we recommend the following:

- Areas of scrub or dense hedgerow should be, as a minimum, 3m tall and 4m wide. Allow room for hedges to expand if necessary.
- Encourage and keep thorny species such as Bramble, Hawthorn or Blackthorn.
- Encourage and keep native climbing plants such as Dog Rose, Honeysuckle, Clematis (Old Man's Beard) or Ivy.
- In the long-term, scrub will eventually turn into woodland and hedges may turn into mature treelines. To maintain the dense, scrubby structure that Turtle Doves prefer, areas may need to be coppiced in sections on a long-term

rotational basis (15 years+).

- Avoid management and cutting between March and September (inclusive) as Turtle Doves can still be nesting in August.
- Turtle Doves will also nest in other habitats. This includes Gorse on heathland, orchards, and thicket stage conifers in forestry areas.



A patch of scrub used by Turtle Doves

Providing water

- Like many seed-eating animals, Turtle Doves need regular access to drinking water, for instance from ponds, artificially-lined pools, semi-permanent puddles and water courses. Accessible water within 300m of suitable nesting habitat will provide Turtle Doves with a place to drink and bathe.
- Water bodies should be accessible. An exposed, gently sloping side is vital. If not, a partially submerged dead branch is a good substitute. Restoring historic ponds should follow best practice set out in the [Guide to the Restoration, Creation and Management of Ponds](#) to ensure that their historic profile is not lost.
- If the local soil structure is not suitable for pond creation, then it is possible to provide other water sources, such as a shallow livestock drinking trough. Care must be taken to ensure this is safe for all wildlife, at a height to prevent access by badgers (in areas with cattle) and the water in the trough is changed periodically to prevent the build up of parasites.



Pond suitable for Turtle Doves

Providing feeding habitat

Turtle Doves feed almost entirely on the ground on the seeds of low-growing annual or perennial plants. They need open ground without tall vegetation to find these seeds. Turtle Doves will find and feed in a wide range of locations that fit these criteria, including roadsides and trackways, coastal dune grasslands, short flower-rich calcareous grassland. But in many places suitable feeding habitat is lacking, therefore we advocate creating more seed-rich habitat. Measures to provide more seed food for Turtle Doves should be located near to suitable nesting habitat (see [Providing nesting habitat](#) section).

1. Allow plants to regenerate naturally

This is the preferred method of creating feeding habitat

- Cultivate an area of land and allow plants to naturally grow. The plants that grow up may provide seeds for Turtle Doves to feed on. This measure may also benefit rare arable plants that might be present in the seed bank and may establish once the soil is cultivated.
- This is particularly useful on lighter soils and is most beneficial for Turtle Doves if cultivated in the autumn as this then allows for plants to regenerate and set seed early the following summer. However if there is space, providing autumn and spring-cultivated plots will provide a variety of seed across the season.



- On heavy soils, where vegetation can become too dense for Turtle Doves to access the seed, a two-stage cultivation programme can be used to create suitable vegetation structure. An autumn cultivation followed by weed management (if necessary) with a second early spring cultivation, is more likely to deliver suitable habitat will minimise pernicious weed problems.
- Evidence shows that on heavy soils, being patient and retaining your plot in the same location will produce optimum Turtle Dove habitat by gradually reducing nutrient levels. This may take a few years. Cutting and removing vegetation at the end of the season can help achieve this.



Annual management (2-stage cultivation method)

The dates given here are a guide, please discuss with your local advisor regarding what is appropriate for your site.

- Cultivate the allocated area between 1 August and 1st November each year in order to produce a flush of autumn growth.
- Carry out weed management if necessary by 15 February.
- Carry out a final cultivation to achieve a fine tilth by 15 March. This should produce spring germinating plants such as Knotgrass, Black Bindweed, Chickweed and Fumitory.
- Do not disturb fallow areas until 31 August.



2) Plant a bespoke seed mix

- In some circumstances, particularly on heavy soils, natural regeneration may be difficult due to excessive plant growth. In these cases, we recommend first speaking to your local Natural England or RSPB advisor to explore how you can make the natural regeneration option work. However, if this is not possible, a sown seed mix can sometimes be considered as an alternative.
- Sow a specially designed seed mix that will provide Turtle Doves with the right food plants. This will provide a source of food throughout the breeding season. Work with your local advisor to identify the right mix.
- If you are on a site with rare arable plant interest, then this option won't be suitable.

When and where to sow

- Wildflowers grow better on less fertile soil where it is also easier to maintain 30-60% bare ground.
- For autumn establishment create blocks or 6 m-wide (minimum) strips between 1 August and 15 October. Plots should be sown at no more than 6 kg per hectare, and in most cases a much lower rate of 2-3 kg/ha can provide optimal foraging conditions for Turtle Doves. This recommended seed rate is based on recent studies.

- Rates may vary with soil type – speak to your local advisor. It should be broadcast, not drilled. Once sown, the area should be rolled.
- Where feasible, establishing multiple plots in autumn and spring will likely increase the range and timing of plants available.

Maintenance

- During the first year, you can top the plots to control the growth of problem weeds during establishment. In following summers, between 15 June and 7 July, half of the plot should be lightly cultivated or as a second choice alternative, cut to 5cm, on a rotational basis, i.e. do not manage the same area in successive years. In all cases check timings of any spring and summer management with your local advisor to protect other wildlife interest.
- Cutting and removal or light cultivation between 1 and 31 September may be required to prevent build up of vegetation.
- With successful establishment and good management and patience these plots can last many years. However, in some cases mixes may need to be re-sown every two to three years. If in doubt, contact your local advisor.

Supplementary feeding

Supplementary feeding is an important stop-gap measure to support the longer-term aim of providing forage areas of native wild plants. Research has shown that native plant seeds provide best nutritional value for growing Turtle Dove chicks, but supplementary feeding will provide an additional energy boost, particularly for adult birds. This helps them quickly get into breeding condition on return from migration encourage multiple nesting attempts during the summer. We recommend reading our detailed research-based guide before starting feeding. Click on or scan the QR code to the right.



Key points

When

- Supplementary feeding should be carried out from at least the first week of May to the end of July. Starting earlier and continuing later can also be beneficial and is recommended wherever possible.
- Use a recommended mix of suitable small seed types varieties, not just a single variety, to provide better nutritional variety.

Where

- Supplementary food should be located within 300m of known Turtle Dove nest sites, or good nesting habitat.
- Feeding sites must be a bare surface free of vegetation or have vegetation that is short and patchy. Avoid areas of existing botanical interest.

How

- Seed should be put out each week and spread thinly and evenly across the whole feeding site, to avoid creating piles or trails of seed.
- If there is a visible build-up of unused food, stop feeding for at least one week to reduce disease risk. If seed build-up continues, consider using an alternative site.



Credit: Sam Turley (rspb-images.com)

For further information about providing supplementary food or for any other conservation measure outlined in this document, please contact your local Turtle Dove advisor. Contact details are available on the [Operation Turtle Dove website](https://www.operationturtledove.org).