



A briefing from RSPB Northern Ireland

GAEC hedge cutting dates and the nesting seasons of birds in Northern Ireland

Hedgerows are an important feature of the Northern Ireland countryside and provide vital nesting habitat for a wide variety of birds. Cutting dates should be planned to avoid the breeding seasons of hedgerow-nesting birds. Under Northern Ireland’s Cross Compliance regulations, hedgerow management is not permitted between 1 March and 31 August. Whilst the RSPB is aware of the interests of other stakeholders, we believe there is strong scientific justification to maintain the current Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) non-cutting dates of 1 March to the 31 August in Northern Ireland.

Table 1 shows the length of the breeding seasons for UK and Northern Ireland Priority Species (birds) that use hedgerows for nesting, many of which raise multiple broods in a single year. This analysis is based on reviews of many scientific studies. Priority Species are those most in need of conservation action in Northern Ireland and many are the subject of conservation work funded by the Northern Ireland government and other bodies. Given the laying and fledging periods measured in scientific studies across the UK, it is clear that the species shown in Table 1 would suffer nest damage or abandonment if cutting were permitted in August and their conservation status could be affected as a result. In many cases, cutting in September could also cause damage and we believe the existing dates are already a compromise.

Table 1. UK and Northern Ireland Priority Species (birds) that would suffer disturbance during the nesting period if hedge cutting was permitted in August (Laying periods and fledging periods (i.e. the time taken for nestlings to fledge) are taken from studies reviewed in S. Cramp (eds) *Handbook of the Birds of Europe the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Oxford University Press)

Species	Red-listed		Laying period	Fledging period (the time it takes from hatching for nestlings to leave the nest)
	Ireland	UK		
Duncock		√	Early March to late August	11-12 days
Song thrush		√	Late February to late August	11-17 days
Grasshopper warbler		√	Early April to mid-August	10-15 days
Spotted flycatcher		√	Late May to mid-August	10-17 days
House sparrow		√	Early April to late August	11-19 days
Tree sparrow		√	Early April to mid-August	15-20 days
Bullfinch		√	Late April to late August	12-18 days
Lesser redpoll		√	Early April to early August	9-14 days
Linnet		√	Mid-April to early August	10-17 days
Reed bunting		√	Mid-April to early August	9-13 days
Yellowhammer	√	√	Early April to early September	9-18 days

In addition, many other common and widespread species such as the woodpigeon, wren, blackbird, whitethroat, garden warbler, blackcap, willow warbler, chaffinch, greenfinch, and goldfinch all lay eggs and/or rear young during August (see Winspear & Davies (2005) *A management guide to birds of lowland farmland*. The RSPB, Sandy). The nests of these species could be damaged or abandoned if the GAEC cutting dates were extended into August.

The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 provides legal protection to all wild birds in Northern Ireland. This legislation, in part, transposes the EU Birds Directive 1979. Under Part 2 of the Order, it is an offence to intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built, or take or destroy the eggs of any wild bird. Given that many hedgerow-nesting species rear young in August, extending the hedge-cutting window into that month would invite land managers to break this law.

The Whole Farm Payment is funded by public money to protect the environment so it is unclear how DARD could justify changes to the current cutting dates given the scientific evidence provided above. For Priority Species, a change could also compromise existing publicly funded efforts to support their recovery, such as the management requirements of the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS). It would be absurd if the management prescribed in one form of publicly funded scheme were compromising the benefits of another.

Based on our analysis, we do not believe that the GAEC hedgerow non-cutting dates should be amended. We believe the existing dates of 1 March to 31 August should remain in place.

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