

# Redshank



Above: The redshank has a red bill and red legs, and shows white on its wings and tail in flight.

Redshanks breed on wet grassland on upland and lowland farms and crofts, and on saltmarshes. The number of redshanks has declined significantly in many areas of the UK. On farmland, the main reasons for this have been the drainage, re-seeding and fertilising of grassland, although the abandonment of farmland can also have a negative effect.

## BREEDING REDSHANKS NEED:

### Wet ground for feeding

Redshanks, especially the chicks, feed on insects at the edge of pools, ditches and creeks. They are found on wet grassland and merse/saltmarsh that hold shallow surface water or pools from April at least until late June. Chicks feed themselves, so flashes of water close to their nest sites increase their chances of fledging successfully.

### Grassland with a varied sward height

Redshanks are most likely to be found in fields with a mosaic of short damp grassland for feeding, and grassy or rushy tussocks to nest in. Redshanks will feed around creeks and pools on saltmarsh and nest in tussocky vegetation, above the high water mark.

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE REDSHANKS?

### On pasture

- Retain damp ground as this provides suitable feeding areas.
- Create wet areas by blocking drains and small ditches in suitable areas. Shallow open water is particularly important for feeding. Aim to maintain small flashes of water at least until the end of June. Chicks, which start to hatch from the end of May, will feed along the edge of these wet areas.
- Use appropriate levels of grazing to maintain short grassland for feeding, but with tussocky sedges, rushes or grasses for nesting and cover. Redshanks need short grassland with tussocks from early April, so plan grazing for the end of the year or early spring to create suitable conditions. Cattle cope better with wet ground conditions and are more likely to create a varied sward than sheep.
- Where possible, exclude livestock from fields used by breeding redshanks during April and May. Where grazing must take place, low stocking rates help to minimise nest trampling. Ideally, keep stock levels below one livestock unit per hectare throughout this period.
- Grazing, ideally by cattle, from late summer onwards can provide the appropriate sward structure. Remember to adjust your grazing rates to compensate for any reduced grazing during the spring.
- Ensure that pastures do not become overgrown with rushes as redshanks only benefit from small scattered stands of rush. If there is cover of more than 30% and/or rank,

unmanaged rushes, it is detrimental to bird numbers and productive grazing. Rushes can be controlled by topping in August, followed by cattle grazing or a second cut four to eight weeks later.

### On hay and silage fields

- Rolling or harrowing fields used by breeding redshanks can destroy nests and kill chicks.
- Redshanks start nesting around mid-April and take about six weeks from laying to hatching. Consider providing six weeks free from field operations, from mid-April, to limit damage.

### On saltmarsh/merse

- Redshank nesting densities can be very high on saltmarsh.
- Graze lightly, to maintain a sward of variable height along with substantial areas of creeks that provide the waters edge used by chicks for feeding.

### Nesting habitat

- Damp grassland with a mixture of short swards and tall tussocky vegetation or saltmarshes where light grazing favours a varied sward structure.

### Summer food

- Insects and other invertebrates often picked from grass stems or from the surface or standing water. Chicks in particular feed along water edges where food is concentrated.

### Winter food

- Most redshanks over winter on or adjacent to mudflats and estuaries where they obtain the bulk of their food. Some birds also feed on coastal farmland where they search for soil invertebrates and any insects on grass stems.

## KEY POINTS

- The priority action for breeding redshanks is to provide grassland with a varied sward height, and surface water or wet soil from April to June.
- Extensive grazing suitable for breeding waders, and re-wetting areas of rough pasture, can both be funded by agri-environment schemes.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Lapwing
- Snipe
- Curlew
- Wet grassland for waders
- Managing water levels to benefit birds
- Rush management

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