

Feature

Cover crops: a fundamental management tool



KtB talks to Chris Bright of NGO sponsor, Bright Seeds, about how gamekeepers influence his business.

IN THE EYES OF THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF one of Britain's leading seed suppliers, gamekeepers are a pivotal influence on his business, and the driving force behind two market-leader cover crops.

For Chris Bright of Salisbury-based Bright Seeds, the refreshingly straightforward approach of gamekeepers gives him invaluable insight into what's required for a highly successful modern-day shoot.

"For sure, the effectiveness of cover crops to attract and hold birds can determine the viability of a shoot. Also, such crops often have to fulfil criteria for various environmental schemes, so a balance has to be achieved in many instances," said Mr Bright.

Of the 40 or so cover crop mixtures offered by Bright Seeds, particularly popular is Utopia: a black fast-growing

mustard crossed with a wild Ethiopian kale, usually recommended for sowing in July. It has shown itself an adept holding crop for birds and is noted for its large kale-like canopy and ability to race ahead of weeds; it can achieve a height of 6ft.

It also gives opportunity for weeds to be cleaned up pre-drilling and for a winter cereal crop to be grown beforehand. July sowing also avoids the main flea-beetle season.

"Utopia sets the standard by ticking all the right boxes. For the larger commercial shoots, it has become an integral management tool in retaining bird numbers, and because it grows in challenging conditions, it is not unusual to see it feature in shoots 1,000ft above sea level," said Mr Bright.

"An interesting example of gamekeeper influence was a long-standing customer

deciding to ignore our recommended sowing date and plant in May instead, the logic being that he would get a bigger crop for longer. He was of course right; but there were other benefits too, not least that the earlier sowing gave rise to the plants going to seed by Autumn, with the consequence of attracting more birds and providing them with the highly nutritious feed of oil-based seed.

"The earlier sowing date enabled the shoot to draw more birds and reduce feed costs. The only downside was that the robustness of the near 6ft crop meant that beaters needed chest-waders! But beating has never been a job for the weak-hearted," he added.

Only one cover crop mixture in the Bright range sells more than Utopia, and that is probably because Utopia grown

George Hood, assistant farm manager with Purdey Game & Conservation Award winning Temple Farms of Marlborough, Wiltshire pictured with a Pheasant and Finch mix.



alone does not qualify for environmental schemes such as ELS and HLS. The best seller is Pheasant and Finch. Already 1,000ha is down to this 'gem of a mixture', and Chris Bright believes this could increase five-fold within the next few years.

"The potential for mixtures like this is enormous. Achieving the balance between environmental stewardship and cover crop requirements needs knowledge and know-how, but when you've cracked the formula, you have achieved something very worthwhile.

"February to April is a time when naturally occurring wild bird seed is at its most depleted and when farmland birds are at their most vulnerable. This period is known as 'the hungry gap' and bridging it is the vital objective. Bright's trial work focuses not only on the need for seedling plants in the countryside, but the type and combination of such plants that work best for particular species. With Pheasant and Finch we have married this with an ideal cover crop," he said.

Pheasant and Finch lasts up to two years and is acknowledged by keepers as outstanding for pheasants and partridges. The mixture incorporates mainly spring and some winter triticale and kale treated with cruiser for fleabeetle. The idea of the two different triticales is to get grain in the second year as well as the first.

Working with a variety of country sport and wildlife organisations, Mr Bright acknowledges the importance of the NGO in protecting the countryside and its wildlife. As a financial supporter of the

NGO through Bright Seeds, Mr Bright said he was conscious of the vital role of the NGO in bringing countryside issues and the sport of shooting to the fore.

"For those of us who know and enjoy the countryside it is important we stand and – if necessary – fight for the princi-

ples and traditions we hold dear. The NGO is clear and determined in standing up for those traditions and has become an increasingly important voice of the countryside. It merits support from all who are fortunate to appreciate the values for which it stands," he added.



Pheasant and Finch mix in its second year.



Utopia gone to seed (above) and (below) a close up of Utopia seed.



BRIGHT SEEDS

Bright Seeds is a family run business, founded by David and Sue Bright in 1987. Son Christopher joined in 2002 and is now the managing director. The company employs an enthusiastic, friendly and knowledgeable team. It specialises in forage maize, grain maize, white maize and biofuel maize as well as game cover, stewardship, grass seed, wildflowers, game feed and more.

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