

## Guidance on Meeting Standard R5.1: Providing Natural Range Cover

*R5.1 Natural cover must be present in the form of existing or newly planted trees/shrubs/other at an area equal to at least 5% of the total range area (this may include natural cover meeting the requirements of R2.1).*

### Purpose of the Standard:

The Standard aims to encourage hens to make better use of the range, to provide a safe and enriched ranging environment to benefit the health and welfare of Freedom Food flocks.

### Benefits of natural range cover & improved ranging:

- *Reduced levels of injurious pecking* with improved ranging & canopy cover;
- *Greater behavioural opportunity* through additional dust-bathing and foraging provision;
- *Reduced poaching* around the pop holes & improved litter indoors;
- *Reduced risk of disease* spread due to greater dispersal of manure load;
- *Diet supplementation* from the vegetation itself and the invertebrates attracted by it;
- *Fewer egg seconds* as birds which range well may be less stressed;
- *Reduced mortality.*

More information on the benefits of tree planting can be found at:

<http://www.featherwel.org/Portals/3/Documents/Trees%20for%20your%20farm.pdf>  
& <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/on-farms/>

### What counts as 'natural cover'?

The following features of any natural cover provision are important in encouraging ranging:

- Vegetation should provide **canopy cover** and **shade and shelter** the hens
- Vegetation should not obscure the view of the rest of the range
- Vegetation should not be so thick as to prevent birds seeing into it (and to prevent potential predators from being seen).

For more information go to:

<http://www.featherwel.org/rangehousing/naturalshelter>

**To satisfy Standard R5.1, canopy cover must be provided.**

### Long grasses and Standard R5.1

Many long grasses are not considered suitable to meet the standard as they do not provide canopy cover. Dense long grasses may actually prevent birds from ranging as they provide good cover for predators such as foxes. In addition, there may be issues around bird health and management to consider such as an increased risk of worm burden, crop impaction and egg laying outside.

*N.B. Corridors or strips of long grass may encourage birds to enter the range and **can provide enrichment** by increasing foraging opportunity. Strips of long grass may therefore be used to satisfy Standard R5.2.1 requiring outdoor forage provision, but **if they do not offer overhead shelter they cannot satisfy Standard R5.1.***

### Choosing trees, shrubs and crops for canopy cover

Cover should be planted **as close as possible to the pop holes** to encourage birds to range. As close as 5 meters is recommended, although this will depend upon your site.

**Variety is important** and planting a range of trees, shrubs and / or crops on your range will provide added interest and enrichment for the birds.

The Woodland Trust offers advice on native and non-native trees and shrubs that will provide good cover for free-range hens. Their guide *Tree planting for free-range poultry* can be accessed from the *Natural Cover* pages of the FeatherWel website: [www.featherwel.org](http://www.featherwel.org)

If you are considering planting a large area of your range with woodland or shrub, contact: [woodlandcreation@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:woodlandcreation@woodlandtrust.org.uk) or call 0845 293 5689.

**Trees:** Birch, alder, rowan and willow are all fast growing, hardy trees that will perform well in poor soils and exposed conditions. Rowan and birch provide a light canopy cover that will not require pruning. Light canopy will allow other plants to grow at ground level, providing additional enrichment for hens.

**Shrubs:** Hawthorn, elder and dogwood provide fast growing hardy cover. Hawthorn does not have a large root system, which may make it suitable for less permanent sites.

**Crops:** There is a wealth of useful information regarding game cover crops that can help you to decide which crops might be suitable for your site. Perennial chicory, kale and dwarf sorghum have characteristics which may be considered suitable to satisfy the standard whilst remaining practical. Look for crops that stand well through winter, provide a good canopy and don't grow too densely.

If you are unsure as to whether your plans will satisfy the requirements of the standard, please contact the RSPCA Farm Animal Department for further guidance

Email [farm-animals@rspca.org.uk](mailto:farm-animals@rspca.org.uk) or call us on 0300 123 0183

### Further information:

[Game Cover: Top of the Crops](#) – a guide from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

<http://www.gwct.org.uk/game/advice/game-cover-top-of-the-crops/>

[Range Management in Poultry](#) – a guide from Animal Welfare Approved, including case studies

<http://animalwelfareapproved.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/TAFS-6-Range-Management-in-Poultry-v1.pdf>

[A woodland Trust guide to Tree planting for free range poultry](#)

<http://www.featherwel.org/Portals/3/Documents/WT%20guide%20to%20Tree%20planting%20for%20free%20range%20poultry.pdf>

[Laying Hens go undercover to improve production](#) – research paper

[http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/animalwelfare/1203Bright\\_and\\_Joret\\_2012.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/animalwelfare/1203Bright_and_Joret_2012.pdf)

[Canopy cover is correlated with reduced injurious feather pecking in commercial flocks of free range laying hens](#) - research paper

[http://www.thepoultrysite.com/articles/contents/12-06-13Bright\\_et\\_al\\_2011.pdf](http://www.thepoultrysite.com/articles/contents/12-06-13Bright_et_al_2011.pdf)

## Case Study: Natural Cover Proves Fruitful for Farmer and Flock

Sam and Shelley Traves run their 16,000 bird Freedom Food approved laying hen unit in Lincolnshire, producing eggs for L J Fairburns. Their current flock is their third, after previously farming dairy cattle and beef for some 10 years. Their current flock is now 44 weeks old.

Directly outside of the popholes, a five meter apron of large stones provides good drainage, helping to maintain good litter quality inside the shed. Beyond that, a 500m stretch of hawthorn hedge helps to encourage the birds out onto the range. Sam said ‘we were lucky to have the hedge already in place from our previous enterprises – as well as a few old established trees.’ Sam can see that the hawthorn hedge is important in drawing hens out of the shed onto the rest of the range whilst also having the benefits of being quick to establish and requiring no maintenance.



*Good drainage around the popholes and the hawthorn hedge (above) draw the hens out onto the range (below)*



*It is important that the hens can see through and beyond the natural cover provision.*



*The range beyond the hawthorn hedge being utilised by the hens.*

Beyond the hedge, the Traves have planted an additional 500 trees of a range of species, including birch and maple. These were planted with their first flock and are relatively immature but, having seen the benefits of the already established trees and hedges, the Traves plan to plant even more. “I plan to plant another 500 or so, but this time I plan to use fruit trees. I can sell the fruit at a local market and I know the hens will enjoy any fallen fruit. It’s a win-win. I’d recommend that producers thinking about planting cover think about trees that can provide extra income – whether it’s fruit, wood or even Christmas trees. The hens would love Christmas trees, they’re fast growing and they’d provide good winter cover too”



Sam hopes that the new trees will get the hens ranging even further and utilising the whole of the range. He said: “Each flock is different. This flock is particularly flighty, the least confident of all our flocks to date, but they’re still ranging. I’m sure it’s because of the protection offered by the hedge – I don’t think they’d be ranging if it wasn’t there.” By mid-afternoon Sam estimates that around 30 to 40 per cent of the flock is ranging outside.



*Additional tree cover planted by the Traves. Some birds are already beginning to range in this area but, once it is better established, Sam hopes that the birds will begin to make full use of the whole range.*

*Tree guards protect the young saplings from any pecking or scratching from the hens.*

But what’s more important than any added income is the benefit the natural cover brings to the birds. “We’re animal lovers; we do it because we can see that they enjoy it. It’s great to see the way they are on the range; trundling about, dust-bathing, pecking and enjoying their environment.”



*Hens dust bathing and taking shelter under the natural cover provided*



*Shelley Traves with her hens*