

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Lapwings & Peregrine Falcon

On the 5th May 2017 at 16:00hrs, it was pleasant sunny afternoon. Robert Moore, (an agri-ecology student from Dublin University) and I were observing a group of 3 very small Lapwing chicks of around 4 days of age.

The chicks were closely accompanied by their parents; the hen always staying near and the cock bird wandering around, looking for insects, in the vicinity. Two other adult Lapwings, a cock and a hen, were also feeding nearby.

The area features a rough downland bank sloping steeply down to closely cropped turf with a rather sparse Hawthorn hedgerow running along its east west boundary. On the other side of the hedge is a large area of fallow ground. This is cultivated and left to provide suitable habitat for Lapwings to nest over an extended period.

This pair of Lapwings had previously led their chicks from the fallow field, through the hedge and onto the area of short grass to encourage their chicks to forage. We watched the chicks leaving a patch of nettles in the base of the hedge and wandering around on the turf, sometimes straying as far as 30 feet from the hedge. They would often return to the shelter of the nettles with the hen bird frequently walking up to these and solicitously peering amongst them to check exactly where her chicks were.

A Woodpigeon dropped out of the hedge and settled amongst the chicks, pecking around but causing no concern either to the hen Lapwing or her offspring which continued to rummage amongst the short turf.

A few moments later, a Peregrine Falcon powered past low on our left, flying rapidly with a purposeful short stabbing action of it's dark wings. It flew in a direct line about six foot above the hedge, heading towards the Lapwings. As the Tiercel closed upon them, the adult Lapwings sprang into the air, rising rapidly with deep wing beats, to meet this threat.

Two further Lapwings sped like speeding darts from the fallow field on the left and together with the four adult birds accompanying the chicks, met the Peregrine in a defensively motivated assault immediately above the chicks.

This happened in a split second, there was no hesitation. The Lapwings response to this challenge was unreserved, courageous and direct. In a flurry of action, Lapwings were surrounding the Peregrine in unrestrained aerial combat 20 feet above the ground. It appeared that at least one Lapwing shot up and struck the Peregrine hard underneath his left wing.

The effect of this blow was instantaneous. The Peregrine dropped towards the ground with one wing raised high and the other closed. He lay on the grass exactly where the Lapwing chicks had been a few moments before. The falcon was then surrounded by adult Lapwings which had landed around and approached to within a foot, facing the Peregrine and demonstrating a completely fearless attitude. The raptor was lying flat on the ground with both wings half splayed out. He turned his head to the right and could be seen bating,

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with open beak, at the Lapwing which was closest. About 30 seconds later, the Peregrine recovered his breath and standing up, bringing his wings back to his body, sprang into the air and flying rapidly, made off.

The Lapwings did not attempt to pursue him. A few minutes later, the three Lapwing chick emerged from the patch of nettles where they had sought refuge and continued feeding with their parents and one additional hen bird. So normality was restored. But what an extraordinary demonstration of the ability and courage of Lapwings to confront this most fearsome and efficient of birds of prey.

It is probable that the Peregrine had no interest in the Lapwing chicks but that his attention had been drawn to the pigeon which was feeding amongst them.

I have frequently observed Lapwings responding to predator threat. On one occasion, more than 30 adults pursuing a fox in a wheeling, dive bombing, shouting flock. Only a few weeks ago, over 11 adults were harrying a Red Kite, high over the fields, pecking its tail and driving it away in a magnificent display of aerial agility. Some years ago, I observed a flock of 7 adults harass a Buzzard that dared to approach the breeding area and this too appeared to have been struck and fell stunned in an untidy heap onto the grass. This soon recovered, but flew away, a lesson well learnt.

It is tragic to consider that the opportunities to observe breeding Lapwings, the most resolute of parents, aerial tacticians of supreme manoeuvrability and beauty, are becoming ever rarer.

Lapwings are vanishing in the face of industrial agriculture and climate change. Chicks are failing to survive due to late springs, late frosts, poor habitat and the consequent dearth of invertebrates. This coupled with uncontrolled predation by foxes is placing an almost insurmountable obstacle before chick survival.

Unthinking agricultural operations can be disastrous. Topping before the chicks have fledged will lead to complete destruction. Chicks shelter from predators in nettles, thistles, or areas of rough grass. It should be mandatory that topping does not take place until all chicks have been seen to fledge; this may not be until well into July. If a Lapwing flies over calling 'pee-oo pee-oo', then this proves the presence of chicks. If birds are persistently in an area, then it is highly likely that they have chicks. They may not be visible, but they will be there, so leave well alone.

Simple measures such as this, can make a huge difference to Lapwing survival. This is a challenge that this industry must grasp, to demonstrate concern; for the future, for wildlife, for our world.

Henry Edmunds
May 2017