

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Lapwings & Corn Buntings

The unseasonably warm spell in February tricked some of our lapwings into laying too early in March. The consequence after heavy and prolonged rain, was chilled eggs and deserted nests. Others however, choosing a field in a less exposed situation and delaying breeding by a couple of weeks, have been more successful. Today I was able to see two pairs with one fledged chick each and one pair with two fledged chicks. Other lapwings also have chicks and are protecting their young against all corvids and raptors that come anywhere near the breeding field, where they are currently impossible to see. My plan of providing a sheep grazed field with refuge areas adjacent to the breeding ground has worked perfectly with all the newly fledged birds being taken there by their parents. The attraction being a good hatch of garden chafers and other tasty invertebrates in the short-grazed grass.

Male corn buntings are now rattling away perched on the very top of hedge row trees. This according to Thomas Bewick in his early book on British birds, is for the 'entertainment of the females'. The periodic jangling may be the only bird song of hot drowsy summer afternoons. Corn Buntings which are polygamous, are late breeders. They feed their chicks on cereals, other seeds and a wide variety of invertebrates. Their practice of nesting near ground level in thick grass or in cereal crops, puts them at extreme risk of modern harvesting techniques. However, a few minutes spent observing birds feeding chicks can help identify the approximate area of the nest. Often, this will be in the rough grass around the periphery of the field, close to a patch of hogweed or wild parsnip. I would never try to actually find the nest because this would lead to excessive disturbance and consequent desertion; but when cutting a field for hay or silage, I will leave an extra wide margin around the area where I believe the birds to be nesting.

I have sometimes found buntings nesting the middle of a cereal crop. In that case, I delay harvesting by moving to an alternative field, thus allowing the chicks to fledge.

Field margins and a few rough areas which can be provided by pollen and nectar strips, create good habitat and breeding opportunities of this threatened bird.

In the last few years I have managed to increase the population from one pair to around twelve breeding pairs today. Apparently, the whole of Hampshire only has around 30 breeding pairs. This demonstrates the appalling impact that modern agriculture has had on the Corn Bunting but it also shows that with care populations can and should be encouraged to recover.

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