

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Lapwings – Protecting the Nest sites and Chicks

When I question fellow agriculturalists concerning the status of lapwings on their farm, the usual response is “we used to have them but...”. The simple fact is that the demise of mixed farming as the arbiter of the English landscape has been catastrophic for these ground nesting birds, with little pasture and few spring crops. They are now seeking to survive in an alien habitat. Many farmers are trying to help them with the provision of nesting plots in the new arable landscape; but this is not enough on its own. These are just one element in a management strategy that must be planned and applied with all the care that many lavish on that 4 tonne/acre crop of wheat. Over the past 30 years, I have honed a scheme for lapwings that can be really successful. The first priority is to identify where your birds are nesting and then provide electric fencing protection around the nesting area. A single wire run around the nest keeping about 40 yards away and about 8 inches off the ground, using a powerful electric fencer, will generally keep predators like badgers and foxes out. Upon the hatching, the parent birds will walk their chicks to their nearest suitable feeding habitat. This will be cattle or sheep grazed pasture. Long unkempt grass is of no use, as are cereal crops. I have known chicks walked over a mile across cereal fields to reach a suitable area. Therefore I always ensure that grazed pasture is placed next to the area where I anticipate birds will nest. Electric fencing is also provided around the margin of the grazed field. It is crucial that this field is not topped or sprayed whilst young birds are present. The chicks will shelter in rough grass or clumps of nettles and thistles, in or around the margin of the field.

Chicks are very difficult to see but the attendance of an adult bird during the breeding season, guarantees their presence. Chicks do not fledge until just after 40 days so they are very vulnerable to agricultural machinery, foxes and badgers. Adult lapwings are brilliant at protecting their chicks and will drive away buzzards and red kites and even foxes if about in the day. However at night, foxes have the advantage and will keep returning to the nesting area until all the chicks have been collected. They will take two chicks at a time if feeding cubs. Few things give me more pleasure than finding my gathering of newly fledged young. After flying for the first time, they always assemble in a flock, maybe a couple of miles from where they fledged and there feed and practice flying manoeuvres, often under the supervision of just one or two adults. This flock will build, attracting other juveniles from around the area until in late summer they move on and join with the adults. Electric fencing together with fox control and grazed pasture are the essentials in getting lapwing chicks through to adulthood. Many may balk at this regime, “where is the profit”, “can’t be bothered”, “what’s in it for me”. Such statements fill me with pity, pity for the birds struggling to survive where they are deemed irrelevant and pity for the individual who is unable to appreciate the character and beauty of this amazing bird and its indispensable contribution to a living, exhilarating countryside.

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