

A recipe for Lapwings on the downland of Hampshire & Wiltshire

Henry Edmunds has written a paper on management for lapwings on his 1000 hectare estate on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border. Historically, land used by nesting lapwings was used for stubble turnips grazed through the winter in between spring barley crops, with the following barley being sown in February or March. Breeding densities in such fields sometimes exceeded a pair per hectare. Nests were marked to protect them during cultivation operations. These fields were interspersed with permanent pastures and grazed fields of sainfoin, vetches and rye-grass leys. Birds would often take chicks from the barley into grassland to forage. Some birds were able to nest successfully on pastures which were grazed in early spring and then saved for hay, as growth was much slower without the use of nitrogen fertiliser.

In the mid-1970's, turnips were removed from the rotation and there was a switch to winter cereals. Cattle numbers were reduced, and nitrogen fertiliser was introduced to both the cropping and grassland management. This coincided with a sudden drop in lapwing numbers, but this could have been partially down to weather conditions, as the decline was so sudden. However, lapwing numbers did not recover, and the decline to just three breeding pairs on the whole estate was considered due to these farming changes, combined with a substantial increase in fox numbers.

Today, Henry continues to mark and avoid nests during cultivations. Unfortunately, this leaves obvious uncultivated strips which appear to be cues for predators such as corvids. Two-hectare plots created for nesting stone-curlews seem to work perfectly for this species, but not lapwings: Henry has observed a pair move chicks from a plot $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to a kale crop, presumably for increased security.

Henry has gone to great lengths to secure suitable nesting habitat for his lapwings by managing much larger areas for them to encourage a sizeable colony to nest together and collectively ward off predators. He has managed two fields of 10 hectares each by ploughing in January to create a surface so rough that it deters foxes and provides ideal cover for lapwings. During the course of the nesting season, weeds grow up but these are not topped as they provide useful cover for chicks. When birds are incubating, an electric fence is erected around the entire field perimeter 8 inches (20cm) above the ground. Fox and badger runs through the hedge have ceased to be used by installing such fencing. The fence requires occasional checking and the cutting of weeds that threaten to short the electric current. This is combined with rigorous fox control.

Last year all of the lapwings on the estate nested on these fields. Both fields are adjacent to semi-natural grassland extensively grazed by ewes and lambs such that areas are tightly grazed and other parts grow into taller cover, which is still open enough to allow chicks access for cover. Other factors considered in the location of the fallow fields were that they should be away from thick scrub and woodland, especially rookeries.

Through diligent observation, Henry believes that five nesting pairs reared 13 young in one field last year: well over the rate of 0.7 chicks per pair required to maintain the population. Often the chicks could not be observed, but the behaviour of the adults indicated that the breeding attempt was ongoing. Henry believes that the birds are site faithful: if they breed successfully, they will return in future years. An obvious benefit of fallow land for lapwings is that failed nesters can re-nest, whereas birds in a spring crop are usually limited to one nesting attempt by the growth of the crop.

After all of the chicks have fledged, a summer crop of turnips can be sown.

Henry finishes his article with these words: "The Lapwing – 'the farmers friend' a bird probably more synonymous with agriculture than any other is disappearing. With decisive action the situation can be reversed but can farmers make the effort necessary to save this glorious bird for the pleasure and enjoyment of future generations?"

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