

Lapwings



In spring, the wild aerial acrobatic tumbling, accompanied by a characteristic loud wheezy 'peee-wit', make the Lapwing's display unmistakable. Its apparent black and white pattern, with broad rounded wings and a long fine crest, also add to its distinctiveness. And its familiarity of old has resulted in it acquiring a range of common names, including peewit, green plover and black plover (note that a lot of the 'black' is actually a dark metallic green). It is a farmland bird that has suffered major declines, such that it is now on the Red List of Birds of Concern in UK.

It likes open, even, freshly ploughed land for nesting, or short grassland with bare patches. In recent years it has been trying to breed again around here, but with little success, none actually in the parish of Plumpton, but very close in the neighbouring parishes of Streat and East Chiltonton. A pair south of the railway in East Chiltonton probably bred successfully a few years ago but, when the field got planted up in the following year, they moved to north of the railway and lost out to a high density of sheep. And Reg Lanaway recorded a pair as breeding successfully a couple of years ago on the St Helena Lane side of Plumpton.

In recent years at least one pair has settled on a bare field by 'aerodrome lane'; in their first year, the farmer was very happy to see them back, but was waiting for decent weather to plough the field prior to drilling in some maize. It was agreed that if the young didn't hatch in time, I would mark off the nest area so that the plough could avoid it. With the help of somebody else in the village, I located the nest on 1st May. As usual, the nest was a very few little bits of plant material, arranged on a slightly proud bit of ground (the remains of a ridge) and with four eggs. By 12 May, the adult was still sitting, but the farmer was ready for his planting. We agreed on a 10m area that I would mark off with stakes, but I don't think he was too pleased to find that I had marked off 10m each side of the nest, whereas he thought he had agreed to a 10m wide patch including the nest! The eggs hatched on 19 May, as the maize was beginning to sprout and, as is normal with plovers and the like, the young immediately started walking around (they are 'precocial' – that is, they hatch with eyes open and covered in down and leave the nest in their first day or two). They follow their parents but find their own food, which is

mainly insects and other invertebrates. They were quickly led to a neighbouring field of very short grass, but I don't think the young reached flying stage. And they have tried to nest with even less success on the same field for the last two years. It may be that here crows are more of a problem than farming practices. So, lapwings do seem to be trying to re-establish in the area, but struggling at the moment.

There are guidelines on the management of land to encourage lapwings (and other farmland birds) available from Natural England or RSPB. However, these are really geared towards applications for conservation grant schemes and are probably on a larger scale than might be possible for most of the farms around here. One of their basic requirements seems to be an area of at least two hectares left as suitable habitat from early March until July.

Lapwings have also been a bit more obvious in the winter, with small flocks of up to 40 collecting on various open fields, particularly around North Barnes Lane and just south of the railway. And it is well worth looking carefully through these winter flocks, especially in very hard winter weather, as there are sometimes golden plover mixed in with them.

I would be interested to hear of any observations of these birds attempting to nest in this area. You can also report any sightings on our website at www.plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com

Tony Hutson