

The Lapwing's Tale

Michael Thomas

'Pee-ee wit, pee-ee wit' was once a sound familiar to anyone who walked the countryside, particularly the English countryside. The Lapwing is, or sadly was, the epitome of the landscape of pastoral Britain. Alas, modern farming methods, intensive land use and pesticide application have resulted in a steep decline in the population of this beautiful bird. Here on the Isle of Bute, we are fortunate to have a relatively healthy population. The Lapwing is a bird that warrants a good deal of our bird watching time.

The Northern Lapwing [*Vanellus vanellus* - Latin *vanus*, little ostentatious thing] probably derives its name from 8th Century Old English *Lepenince*, *lepe* meaning to leap and *vinc* meaning to totter. I have in a previous essay referred to the splendid crest of the Great Crested Grebe. The Lapwing has the largest crest of any British bird, making it unmistakable. It has black wings and chest, white belly and face, longish legs, and a long crest of darkish feathers. Its back is a bit like the sheen of oil - black, brown, or green, depending on the light! If you look carefully, you will see that its undertail is a rich rufous colour - for a reason!

It is said that the Lapwing is hated in Scotland. I hope that this is not the case today, but since my wife's forebears were Covenanters, we should note the legend. It is alleged that the Covenanters were betrayed in their moorland fastnesses by the Lapwing's restless cries, and further, its cry 'Bewitched...bewitched' is said to be the cry of the spirits of the dead. John Leyden, Scottish poet and scholar [1775-1811], in his poem, *Wandering Covenanter*, wrote:

*The Lapwing's clamorous whoop attends their flight,
Pursues their steps where'er the wanderers go,
Till the scream betrays them to the foe.*

Robert Burns in *Flow Gently Sweet Afton* is more concerned about his wife Mary:

*Thou green-crested lapwing, thy screaming forbear,
I charge [thee] disturb not my slumbering fair.*

If you are in the south of the island in spring, perhaps on your way to St. Blane's chapel, look towards Arran over the fields, a favoured Lapwing site. Look out for the elaborate courtship display - for three displays in particular:

1. Scrape display.

Seen from early March, this is evidence of the breeding urge taking hold. A bird, probably the male, will make a scrape on the ground, and bob and pirouette on it, upraising and opening its tail, revealing red undertail coverts. As March progresses, these displays become more frequent.

2. Song flight.

Look out for the swerving, side-slipping, corkscrewing, somersaulting, absolutely mad flight behaviour, accompanied by 'pee-e-weet, pee-e-weet' calls. The flight is over the bird's territory and is clearly meant to advertise the male's presence, perhaps his availability, and also his exclusive tenancy.

3. *Wing display.*

He has a mate. The male flies down to her, she does not run away. He holds his wings aloft, for several seconds. The black and whiteness of his wings set off his 'best bib and tucker'. 'I am your man, your fine fella', he seems to be saying!

One other piece of behaviour should be mentioned. We are now into May or June, and from three or four eggs, nestlings have emerged, fully mobile. Like other members of the Plover family, the Lapwing has evolved an escape mechanism should its chicks be in danger. It is the 'broken wing display'. The bird will feign injury in order to lead you away from its young. I have seen this display most frequently in Ringed Plover, who are easily disturbed by people taking a stroll along the beach. NEVER pursue a Lapwing to see the display. Just take a distant watching post and see what happens. Should a Hooded Crow, Rook, Herring Gull or wandering cow appear to threaten a nestling, the Lapwing will respond.

Lapwings in Scotland move from higher to lower ground and to the coast in winter. The Clyde estuary in winter holds large flocks, visible from the train into Glasgow. Bute usually has a wintering flock of around a hundred birds. During hard frosts and harsh weather Scottish Lapwings fly west to Ireland, many being replaced by birds from Europe. Young Lapwings are relatively site-loyal, but there is ringing evidence showing that some young Lapwings move far away from home, having joined up with winter immigrants from continental Europe, leaving with them in the spring. This phenomenon is known as abmigration [*The Migration Atlas*, p. 292].

The late Desmond Nethersole-Thompson, distinguished Scottish naturalist, whom I had the pleasure of knowing, in the book he and his wife wrote, *Waders* (1986), said:

Surely one of our most exciting birds, the Lapwing is a beautiful flier with almost as many stunts as a crack aviator. It is a fighter, always ready to challenge a rival or predator... those mournful cries, with the magic of its wing music, express the eternal spirit of the farmland, and the moorland edges. [p.104]

Enjoy, and marvel at the Lapwing.

This is one of a series of essays that now appear in several booklets on sale in the Museum, entitled **THE BIRDS OF THE ISLE OF BUTE**