Land managers' commitment to endangered waders results in 2021 breeding success

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Strong numbers of lapwing chicks in the Hampshire Avon Valley this Spring show that a community conservation project has left a lasting legacy, says the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT). The LIFE Waders for Real project saw GWCT ecologists working with 40 local land managers to protect threatened species and restore habitats in the valley, which is a key breeding ground for lapwing and other conservation red-list wading birds. The project, from 2015 – 2019, succeeded in reversing the decline of lapwing in the valley as well as, crucially, improving breeding success.

"The land managers have continued with many of the conservation measures we helped them put in place," said Lizzie Grayshon, GWCT lead ecologist on the project, "and, despite the unusually cold Spring, our monitoring suggests there will be at least 100 breeding pairs of lapwing this year, which is brilliant and consistent with the number at the end of the project. The long-term commitment of these 'working conservationists' is vital to ensuring the lapwings' future in the Avon Valley."

The valley's farmers, gamekeepers and river keepers have maintained efforts to protect the endangered bird species from predators like foxes, using techniques previously carried out by GWCT ecologists, such as erecting temporary electric fences around nests.

"The farmers are still really engaged with their waders and provide us with regular updates," said Lizzie. "The fact that lapwing numbers have remained stable since the end of the project shows how, given the right funding, advice and encouragement and by working together, farmers can boost biodiversity in the working countryside. 72% of the land in Britain is farmed, so private land managers must be properly supported to carry out conservation on a landscape scale."

Avon Valley farmer Will Mitchell, who grew up in the valley, said:"If I find some eggs or new chicks I let Lizzie know and she keeps us up to date on progress elsewhere in the valley – we have a bit of competition now on who has the most lapwing. Each year we're getting more and more involved with the birds and all the family enjoy seeing the progress they're making. It's great to see the lapwing coming back and this year we've had three types of egret, a redshank nest and for the first time a pair of oyster catchers."

The impact of 2021's cold Spring has, surprisingly, not been all negative for the waders. Lapwing nest on the ground and their chicks are mobile and foraging for food as soon as they hatch. This year's late cold weather has slowed the growth of vegetation, offering the birds alternative nesting sites, where vegetation would normally be too high for building nests and raising chicks.

Shorter vegetation later in the year also gives lapwing the opportunity to try again, or 're-nest', if they lose their first clutch of eggs to predation. This means that the breeding birds are at different stages: most chicks are fledging, but some pairs have small chicks or are even still sitting on nests.

Ground-nesting birds and their chicks are especially vulnerable to both predators and disturbance by people and dogs. "When you visit the valley, please stick to the paths and keep your dogs on leads," said Will. "If the birds are making lots of noise, this is their alarm call because you may have strayed into their nesting area and could cause them to abandon their chicks, so please take heed and stay on the path."

LIFE Waders for Real project

The Avon Valley, between Salisbury and Christchurch, was one of the key sites in England and Wales for breeding waders, but it has seen dramatic declines in lapwing, redshank and snipe. Only a generation ago, large flocks of lapwing were a familiar sight across the country, but the population has fallen by 80% since 1960 in England and Wales.

After monitoring waders in the valley since the mid-1990s, the GWCT, a national conservation charity based in the Avon valley, decided to act. The Trust's research showed that the decline was due to poor breeding success, with predation of nests and chicks being the main cause. They secured funding and invited the valley farmers to join the LIFE Waders for Real project which began in 2015.

The project succeeded in reversing the decline of lapwing in the valley. By starting with existing breeding

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populations, incorporating predator control alongside habitat creation and, most importantly, involving local land managers, the number of lapwing in the Avon Valley went from 61 pairs in 2015 to 105 at the end of the project in 2019. Crucially, breeding success also improved. To remain stable, a local population needs to fledge an average of 0.7 chicks per pair each year. Before the project, lapwing productivity had dropped as low as 0.4 young per pair. By 2019, the figure was 0.96, safely exceeding the critical level for sustainability.

Waders for Real concluded in 2019 but the GWCT continues to monitor wader numbers in the Avon Valley. Lapwing numbers have remained stable since the end of the project and early counts are showing that redshank are also doing well this year.

Notes to Editors

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies. The Trust is also responsible for several Government Biodiversity Action Plan species and is lead partner for grey partridge and joint lead partner for brown hare and black grouse.

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