

BRING BACK OUR FARMLAND WADERS

Curlew, Lapwing, Snipe and Redshank were once commonplace in our countryside. What went wrong, and how can we put it right, asks *Ben Macdonald*

IN MAY, I travelled to Morocco in search of the near-mythical Andalusian Hemipode. Here, in the traditional farmland strip, on the Atlantic Coast, this strange relative of the Crane persists, mooing quietly like a sheepish cow as it shifts with the crops between wheat and pumpkin, lucerne and alfalfa. Often, when abroad, the search is as rewarding as the find. You travel back in time to landscapes untouched by pesticides and places where birds are still actively recruited to human activities. This, hemipodes aside, was what I found so fascinating in traditional farmland Morocco.

The tiny strip farms here, ploughed by hand, were situated adjacent to salt pans, on the coastal side, and barren rocky fields, on the other. This farmland was a magnet for life. Yellow Wagtails and Corn Buntings were as common as the Turtle Doves that fed on arable grains. Southern farmland birds, like cisticolas and Serins, sang everywhere. The fields were not only alive – they held a higher density of birds than all surrounding habitats. Life was drawn by an infinite abundance of seeds, insects and places to nest. But most striking, for me, were the Collared Pratincoles.



Lapwing



Redshank



Snipe

Nature Picture Library

FLPA

Nature Picture Library

↑ CURLEW

The haunting cry of this curve-billed wader was once a familiar farmland sound

Nature Picture Library

WADER CONSERVATION

The farmer I was staying with had ploughed two fields. Into every furrow, without hesitation, moved pratincoles. Females were watched scraping out, in anticipation of nesting. In adjacent fields, ploughed weeks before, the cautious heads of incubating birds were spotted as we approached. The coexistence of these birds with farmland – and their love of farmland – was amazing. But it shouldn't have been. One hundred years ago, waders thrived on farmland in Britain, moved in and raised chicks with success. Today, you need to drive a long way north to get any sense of the Curlews, Lapwings, Redshanks and Snipe that once towered over lowland English skies.

A walk in 1830 in Richmond Park would have revealed, to the careful eye, a very different avifauna than today. Parakeets had yet to begin their quest for world domination, but Lapwings were everywhere – as they were across Britain at that time. In fact, the four waders featured in this article – Lapwing, Redshank, Curlew and Snipe – were really just afterthoughts of large areas of the countryside.

Why so complicated?

The requirements of these four waders are not complex. They are not hard to understand. We are talking about adaptable species, with a global range, which have existed here for millions of years. Why



Nature Picture Library

← SUCCESS

Collared Pratincoles thrive on farmland on the continent

↓ COASTAL

Today, your best chance of seeing many waders, including Curlew and Whimbrel, is to head for the sea or wetland reserves

then is it so possible to drive to work, or even go birding in lowland Britain, and never see the display flight of a single wading bird? Why are we losing these generalist species at such a terrifying rate?

Let's start with the common ground. All are ground-nesters and ground-feeders. They need bare ground or undisturbed low sward up to 30cm high for nesting. They need moist to wet ground for probing for invertebrates as adults. Their chicks can only probe on the surface with their fragile bills. Finally these waders need areas of longer sward for concealing chicks and feeding in safety away from a nest.

There is a fourth variable – predation – one that can be uncomfortable for conservationists, but more so for the birds. Macdonald, in the magazine *Ibis* (2008), reviewed all scientific papers on the subject in Europe and concluded that “more than half of studies... reported clutch failure rates of over 50% attributable to predation alone, a rate that is likely to be associated with declining populations”. Today, predation does matter. But once upon a time, however, 50% clutch predation rates weren't a big deal – so how did we get to a stage where they are?

The problem is that the simple ground conditions waders need to survive are also very simple to destroy. Travel to Norfolk to see flocks of wintering waders and you will see a landscape dotted with the windmills that helped drain their breeding habitat. We are very adept, as a nation, at draining land, and have done so on a landscape level for centuries. In a nutshell, you can destroy entire populations of wading birds on their breeding grounds simply by removing water from soil – whether through planting crops that take up water or draining fields into a rhyne or ditch. Forget the rest – this alone guarantees extinction. If wader adults and chicks cannot find enough soft, wet and food-rich ground to feed, they are history.

The rest is just as easy. You remove longer-sward grasses simply by ploughing them into the ground

during the breeding season. You plant over them with monocultures that change the soil structure and moisture content over time. You deploy livestock in large numbers to the same effect. Cattle are effective mowing machines and affect wader densities not just on arable land but saltmarsh. Pesticide use on pasture reduces invertebrate abundance. Ultimately, our waders, like many vanishing birds, need a degree of dereliction – scruffy wet areas to feed and varied grassy areas to nest and hide. Drainage dries soil – and this destroys the ability to feed. Most forms of agriculture dominate this drying land with dense crops or denuded pasture – destroying the ability to nest. This is achieved by providing too much or too little sward. It is easy to have waders. It is even easier, however, to get rid of them.

To get our waders back and reverse more than two centuries of decline, we need a short and long term strategy. These will not always involve the same things. Firstly, let's see what we have left as refuges.

At a landscape level, we only really have waders in the north, becoming quite abundant in areas like the Dales and southern Highlands, and common in the traditional farmland of the Hebrides and Orkney, as well as naturally abundant in the Flows. The northern uplands offer three key factors for wader persistence. Firstly, an extent of wet feeding ground

↓ HABITAT

Lapwings need bare ground to nest, close to a ready supply of food



Why is it so possible to drive to work, or even go birding in lowland Britain, and never see the display flight of a single wading bird?

Nature Picture Library

Nature Picture Library

WADER CONSERVATION

that cannot be drained with the same ease as the lowlands. Secondly, arable activity reduces above 200 metres, resulting in pasture as the predominant land use. This results in increased tussocky grassland for nesting and longer rushes near field margins for feeding and cover. Thirdly, large parts of northern England and Scotland are subject to predator management, which, with a range of associated problems including persecution, also has associated benefits – predominantly the removal of the corvids and Foxes that predate most nests. All of these factors exist at a landscape level in large areas of northern England. The results are vast tracts of moist ground, short and long sward, and, on many estates, reduced ground predation and high breeding success.

For our short-term solution, therefore, we can learn from purposeful conservation of the Nene Washes (Cambridgeshire) – but also the accidental conservation of northern estates. Whatever the different ideologies behind them, both are promoting varied, damp and food-rich habitats for waders to survive.

It can be done

Travel to the Nene Washes or Sedgemoor (Somerset) and you will see what is possible, on a small-scale, with intensive conservation management. You will see Redshanks bobbing on posts, Snipe drumming overhead, Lapwings dancing with their weird electric song and Curlews bubbling away.

Travel then to the Spey Valley and the area known as the Sponge of Badenoch. South of Aviemore, on the A9, park at Etteridge and walk north-east across the moorland. Your map will reveal a maze of lochans. Walk and wonder at the staggering number of Lapwings and Curlews on the drier heaths, the Dunlin and Snipe rising over the wetter mires, the Redshanks and sandpipers in the reedy fringes. Cuckoos and Whinchats are common. Waders are everywhere. But there is a catch: this is a managed moor. The wildlife is a glorious by-product of something less glorious – hunting grouse or, in this case, deer, for sport. Waders are everywhere, because the odds are rigged against predators. Wader density is artificially high – but arguably, everywhere else, wader density is artificially low. We play God with waders and all birds across Britain – here, at least, it's to their benefit. Whatever we think of the people involved with managing this land, or their practices, we need to visit these accidental 'reserves' and take away lessons for conservation.

Travel finally to the Outer Hebrides, not just for the Corn Crakes but a farmland that still recruits and promotes waders. These meadows are alive with Dunlin and Snipe, Curlew, Redshank and Lapwing.



Nature Picture Library

↑ WETLAND

Damp ground is a vital source of food for many of our waders

↓ FEEDING

Redshanks feed close to water sources, so their needs are quite specific

Stopping the rot

To restore our lowland waders, a short-term plan has to centre around halting decline in the last outposts of lowland Britain. In 2004, a repeat survey in the New Forest found 117 pairs of Lapwing, 111 pairs of Snipe, 99 pairs of Curlew and 42 pairs of Lapwing. The New Forest, as I've said in all my articles, is a gem – a vast tract of land just waiting to be properly conserved. There is no excuse for failing to protect prime habitat on a massive scale.

Yet, even here, wader numbers continue to fall. The right to walk dogs currently sits above the right of our grandchildren to hear a bubbling Curlew. As far as I can see, there is nothing at all, except 'awareness'. It seems inconceivable that wardens of Yellowstone would permit feral animals to trample or scare a vital refuge of ground-nesting birds. We are more than happy to let this happen. If we cannot save the New Forest as a landscape for waders, it is senseless to think about expansion elsewhere.

For now, it seems enough of a challenge to retain waders in existing haunts – isolating sufficient areas of land from human disturbance, retaining moisture and varied sward, and reducing predation as a short-term necessity. In the long term, if we get that far, the future looks brighter.

It is incredible how much land in Britain is owned by so few people. This can be seen as a curse but it's equally a gift. As conservation finds new sources of money, and some types of farming become unprofitable for those involved, the possibility to buy lowland landscapes becomes an exciting 100-year possibility.

Were we to seek expansion of the Somerset Levels, restoring the entirety of it to its former state as a maze of wader-friendly meadows – and of Fenland, and other lowlands – we might begin to see the resurgence of a landscape where waders were an afterthought, or even an accident once more.

Nobody dreams of a 500-year plan to have tiny reserves or kept moors. But these are the only short-term strategies that will get us to a long-term future. If we can keep the Levels and Dartmoor, the Fens and New Forest alive for waders, we have bought ourselves time to mend the Lowlands. In the north, likewise, if we can halt declines in the Hebrides and learn even from those we distrust – the owners of estates whose land teems with waders – we'll be richer and better for it. Then, as conservation evolves, we will have the tools to ensure that, one day, the Curlew bubbles over Britain once again.



FLPA





Curlew

Curlews are unfussy breeders, provided their key requirements are met. In spite of being large ground-nesters, Curlews – like most waders – seem to like a nest with a view. They favour short tussocky grassland in which to incubate. I've watched females on nests in Breckland placed on bare soil, and found others in just a few centimetres of grass along the base of stone walls and the centre of grass moors in Lancashire. In spite of the Curlew's long bill, this is not a consummate digging machine. They take insects found on or just below soft ground, while young chicks forage exclusively on the surface. Like most waders, therefore, they need those three requirements – dryish short sward for nesting, wettish ground for feeding, and longish cover for hiding their chicks. Apart from that, it's really not that hard to be a Curlew. You can breed in sheep fields in Lancashire, saltmarsh in Norfolk or wild heather moorland in Scotland.

Globally, our Curlew is now near-threatened. Curlew species have an unpleasant habit of going suddenly extinct – so this, together with a 60% decline in Northern Ireland since 1980, means we need to be very, very careful with our own.

Lapwing

Lapwings are simple and beautiful birds. They bring a primal joy to the skies where we still see them. A ground-nester, they are capable of breeding at high densities on open soils, gravel, grassland, heathland and a variety of wetter habitats, including short-sward grass moors and peat bogs. Bare ground is the key requirement for nesting. This is a protracted affair that takes place from late March to June; often involving several replacement clutches to deal with high levels of predation. Feeding is a little more specialised. Birds feed mainly in damp habitats with short-grass, such as pasture. Lapwings feed on earthworms, leatherjackets and a range of insects and their larvae. These are both plentiful in, and most easily extracted from, damp soils with low vegetation. Having declined continuously since the 19th Century, we have lost a further 50% of our Lapwings between 1987 and 1998 alone.



Redshank

Redshanks frequent wet heathland, wet meadows and damp grazing pasture – with 45% of remaining birds nesting on saltmarsh. As you travel north you can find them on the reedy fringes of lochs, peat bogs, and sometimes in great abundance on the floodplains of lochs and rivers. Like many waders, Redshanks need a range of vegetation heights to survive, nesting in quite short sward (but not bare ground) and feeding close to water sources. Areas of taller vegetation conceal chicks from predators.

Redshanks have always had a northerly and easterly bias in Britain. In the 19th Century, the Historical Atlas shows they bred commonly across Scotland, Northumberland and Durham – and Lincolnshire and Norfolk. South-coast populations extended from Hampshire to Kent. Redshanks suffered one of the earliest farmland declines of any wader on record; drainage and the expanse of cultivation had already destroyed much of their range by the middle of the 19th Century. Since then, they have continued to decline – we lost a further 23% of birds between 1985 and 1996 and there is no evidence we've reached the bottom yet.

Snipe

Snipe are most often watched crouched in juncus at coastal marshes. They nest in dense tussocky vegetation 10-30cm tall and feed by probing for invertebrates in wet ground. Camouflage-specialists, female Snipe prefer to walk off a nest to feed, rather than fly, so that 'dry-wet' proximity is important. As the season goes on, whatever moisture there is in the ground will reduce. For Snipe to survive, their chick-rearing period in June must see the retention of damp areas which were, in all probability, poorly-drained or flooded the previous winter.

Snipe were widespread across Britain early in the 19th Century, although already the drainage of land was impacting on their numbers. By the end of the century, these effects were felt at a county level, with birds lost from places like Oxfordshire. Between 1900 and 1940, their fortunes began to turn around as agricultural depression led to the increase of pasture and fallow land. But the wet, fallow real estate of the Snipe had been too far damaged – to this day, Snipe continue to decline every year, with wet meadow surveys in England and Wales revealing a 62% decline between 1982 and 2002.

