

FOCUS ON THE BIRDS OF THE PARISH -LAPWING

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good “.

In February 2019 a routine and necessary land management “ burn “ by the Forest Conservators’ staff of old straggly gorse, of little ecological value, went out of control due to unpredicted high winds combined with unseasonable high temperatures around 20 deg. Celsius. The consequence was around 100 acres of heathland, mainly gorse and heather, burnt to ground level.

The resultant exposed bare ground, bog and pools and subsequently emergent short vegetation over an extensive open treeless area north of Chelwood Gate village & east of Isle of Thorns, known by the macabre name “ Undertakers “, afforded a rare natural opportunity. Within two months, on 17 April 2019 , a party of three wandering LAPWINGS (new official name “NORTHERN LAPWING: Sussex country name “PEEWIT”)had literally “dropped in “. This species had not made breeding attempts on Ashdown Forest since I believe the 1990s due to the encroachment of scrub on the open heaths. Mostly single birds had been seen for a day or so on the Forest since the millennium. Once a common breeding bird in Sussex, the effect of intensive arable farming practices, including the use of pesticides , herbicides and winter sowing of crops has made for a combination of too tall crops in the spring breeding season, added to a lack of insect food on which Lapwings feed themselves and their young.

LAPWINGS are ground-nesting wading bird which sensibly require short vegetation at

breeding time so that an incubating female and its alert mate can “spot “any danger above the level of the crop/ vegetation in which they have chosen to nest. The male can then fly up and give aerial battle to passing Crows, Kestrels etc. and, in the case of humans and dogs, will fly around and above giving





piercing calls during its “butterfly” flight hopefully drawing the walker and dog away. These wading birds also require muddy wet ground, full of insects on which to feed the chicks. All these conditions became present at “Undertakers “. It is not known whether the Lapwings bred successfully in their first year of colonisation in the parish, 2019, nor in the second year when they arrived back on 11 April 2020 .

However, the early arrival of one Peewit on 21 February

2021 augured well. A female was seen brooding on the ground in April /May.

Then lo and behold, a keen-eyed local walker spotted one or possibly two chicks scurrying about on the wet heath on 1 June 2021. Three chicks were also noticed, by a different local walker, in early June 2021 in the very same area, dusting themselves in dry sand . Then on 13 June 2021 the three juveniles had clearly reached adult size ; six of these Plovers were watched in a flock circling above the fields of the National Cats Centre, their butterfly-like flight unmistakable to the local walker. A success story during the pandemic !

Our Chelwood Gate LAPWINGS left their breeding area in late June and will now probably be feeding on the mudflats and salt marshes along the Sussex coast. Let’s look forward to the return of these stunning pied plovers in 2022.

CLIVE POOLE, Voluntary Ranger Ashdown Forest.