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Farmers can be key to the survival of wading birds

I am co-chair of the Working for Waders Initiative. This is a Scotland wide programme to raise awareness of the severe declines we have seen in wading birds - such as curlew, lapwing and oystercatcher – over the past 25 years.



Just as importantly, the Initiative is also helping to highlight how these declines – which are driven by the low number of chicks surviving during the breeding season - can be reversed.

All land managers have role to play in this process. But there are a range of specific actions which farmers and crofter can do to help improve chick survival during this April to June breeding season. In fields where waders are nesting, this could simply involve reducing grazing pressure to prevent trampling of the eggs or chicks by livestock or not rolling the fields until the end of June.

Waders and their chicks need to be able to probe in wet areas to find soil-dwelling insects and earthworms to eat. Not draining the wetter areas of one or two fields or even just smoothing out the sides of steep ditches can help increase such feeding opportunities.

Some actions can even be win-wins, being beneficial to both agricultural productivity and the waders.

For example, applying lime to improve soil pH can increase the abundance of invertebrates the birds prey upon. And cutting rushes – outwith the breeding season – provides the birds with access to those invertebrates across a greater area in any one field.

Such management will certainly help. But in the vast majority of cases, it will also need to be complemented by actions to reduce the predation pressures coming from foxes and crows. Which on hill farms in particular, will also have positive knock-on effects on livestock productivity.

Last week I helped run a Working for Waders workshop, where we showcased a range of examples from across Scotland where such actions have been shown to help increase wader numbers on farms.

All involved farmers and crofters working in collaboration with agricultural and conservation advisors. They also helped highlight how some small changes on any individual farm or croft can actually make a big difference for waders on the ground.

But more needs to be done. The partners in the Working for Waders Initiative are therefore keen to identify additional groups of farmers or crofters willing to undertake collaborative management to increase wader numbers across their farms and crofts.

Davy McCracken
Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre