

McCracken, D. 2018. Trying to win birds back. *Press & Journal*, 21st July 2018

Trying to win birds back

I was born and bred on a hill sheep farm in south-west Scotland. I was therefore familiar with the haunting calls of curlew and the constant pee-wit of lapwings as they nested and fed on the surrounding moorlands and inbye grasslands.

Sadly populations have declined markedly across Scotland, with breeding lapwing numbers falling to less than half of 1994 levels and breeding curlew numbers falling by over 60 percent. Changes in the way nesting and feeding habitats are being managed and increased predation pressure have been identified as key drivers of the declines.



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The Scotland wide trends have been mirrored on Kirkton & Auchtertyre. Up to twenty years ago we regularly had three pairs of curlew nesting on the hill and one or two pairs of lapwing around the low ground fields. Since then we have lost lapwing from the farms altogether and might only have a pair of curlew breeding on the high hill every other year.

We established two new wetland areas on the lowland part of the farms two years ago under the Agri-Environment & Climate Change Scheme. We haven't seen any return of curlew or lapwing yet, but snipe and waterfowl – together with myriads of dragonflies and damselflies - certainly seem to appreciate these small areas of open water and muddy edges.

We are also liming our inbye fields to improve grassland productivity. And although it might seem counter-intuitive, it is likely that increasing the pH in these fields will potentially encourage the return of wading birds by increasing the soil invertebrates that they feed on.

I would encourage any farmer interested in helping curlew and lapwing to engage with the new Working for Waders Initiative, which is looking to establish more collaborative management on the ground for these birds across Scotland.

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