

Chicks and avian predators - 24/6/25

The excitement of chick hatching rapidly turns to sadness as the young chicks are picked off by avian predators such as crows, lesser black backed gulls, sparrow hawks and kestrels.

The first trail camera photo below shows a curlew chick about 5 days old, just before it is snatched by a female sparrowhawk. The second photo, taken less than a minute later, shows the sparrowhawk partly out of the shot and the male curlew, beak open alarm calling on the right but no chick.



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The pairs in four of our fields seem to have already lost their chicks and left their territories. However, from a young age curlew chicks are highly mobile and there is a small chance the family may have moved off territory.

Red kites inevitably turn up in numbers when fields are mown; they are scavenging the dead and dying creatures hit by the mowers. They will undoubtedly take small chicks that have survived the mowing but are left exposed by loss of cover. The photo below, taken by Kelvin, shows a red kite being chased off by an alarm calling male curlew. Unlike crows and buzzards which actively hunt curlew chicks, kites seem to be mere opportunists; they lose interest and drift away to another field when mowing is completed.



The early hatched chicks that are still alive are now around three weeks of age and the females will soon desert, leaving the chicks solely in the care of the males. Before long, no pairs will be seen chick guarding together, just a solitary male standing on a wall.

At three weeks the chicks are too large to be snatched by a crow, but buzzards remain a considerable risk until they are fledged at 6 weeks. At this age the chicks start falling prey to families of foxes that have left their earths and are hunting together across the countryside.

In the past 2 weeks contact calls have been heard regularly in this valley. They are from pairs that have lost their chicks during silage harvesting in surrounding areas. They drift into the project area looking for a friendly welcome but when they encounter a pair that are still defending their territory, they are driven away.

The arrival of these birds can cause considerable confusion to observers. Especially when 2 pairs are seen on the same or adjacent fields, often apparently at peace with each other. Where has this additional pair come from? What are they planning to do? Which pair are supposed to hold this territory? Usually, after prolonged observation, territorial aggression manifests and defines the true status of these pairs.

At the moment, the outsiders arriving in this area are mainly males that have lost the chicks they were left guarding when the females deserted. They are clearly not pairs trying to establish a new territory or lay a second clutch so the situation is more easily interpreted.

The difficult task ahead is to keep track of those chicks that have survived so far.

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