

Build It and They Will Come



“Build it and they will come”. That’s what Kevin Costner said in the film *Field of Dreams*. In Kevin’s case he was talking about a baseball pitch, but I thought the principle might still apply to other things. In my case, it was lapwings.

My building efforts started 10 years ago. I had never seen a lapwing on the field in question. In fact, the only decent record of lapwings breeding on the farm came from my Mum’s *Diary of a Farming Year* which she wrote in 1987. There is a short entry for 22nd June: “Long walk to the Moor late last night to find lapwing chicks!”.



Despite the lack of recent lapwing activity on the farm, there were some occasional sightings nearby. The ‘Lapwing Field’ consisted of 25 acres of improved, ryegrass pasture that was difficult to drain and occasionally cut for silage. Nothing wrong with that maybe, but it didn’t fit the bill for lapwings; in breeding habitat terms it would have been the equivalent of a blue tit trying to nest on a telegraph pole.

I set to work. Stage one involved some blocking of drains that my father put in the early 1970s. Some tense conversations preceded this. The next step was to put in a couple of wader scrapes; many more have followed

since. The result was remarkable and surprising. The birds quickly found the site and bred for the first time. Seeing newly hatched chicks feeding around the fringes of a newly dug muddy scrape was a special moment.



Cattle are an essential part of habitat management for waders and I was itching to get some of my own. I wanted a breed that was hardy, had a good temperament, natural foraging ability and produced a commercial calf. Luings ticked all the boxes. In 2015 I bought five Luing heifers from Shinness and Monzie at the Dingwall Premium Sale, and two more the following year.

It was my good fortune to strike up a partnership with Graeme Macrae of Kintail Luings. Graeme and I run a similar set up; juggling a small herd of cattle with full-time employment. His cattle come to Knockbain in the summer and we share a bull, most recently the excellent Commonsides Scania purchased at Castle Douglas in 2017. I keep reminding Graeme that the Knockbain grass contributes to him regularly topping the Dingwall Premier Sale with his fine heifers! I sell my heifers at the Dingwall sale in May and take male calves through to finishing, selling them direct to Munros in Dingwall.

The Luing cattle deliver exactly what

the lapwing need. Lots of quite heavy late summer, autumn and early winter grazing leaves the sward nice and short, a bit poached in places, ideal for lapwing arriving in March. 2020 has been a particularly successful breeding season. We had four pairs that each successfully raised at least one fledged chick, and at least one pair fledged two.

The Luings are also ideal for grazing the wildflower meadows that we are expanding on the farm. Heifers spend the late summer on one of the meadows once it has flowered. The cows will do the same on a new 5 acre meadow we sowed in the autumn.



The next stage is trialling some mob grazing and herbal leys. I’m also interested in how we can adapt the chemicals we put on / in our animals to maximise the dung beetle population which is important to lapwings and other wildlife. Getting waders and more wildlife back on the farm is a big challenge but Luing cattle are essential to what we are doing.

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