

FEATURES



Lapwings are patient hunters.  
PHOTOS BY STACY GARCIA

# The Southern Lapwing, Sentinel of the Savanna

ELIZABETH ROSE  
SEEBARAN

PERHAPS you were playing football or cricket one day when you were attacked? Or maybe you were peacefully attending to your garden or lawn? Wherever you were, that piercing call might have been your only indication of the feathered bomb that was coming your way. Indeed, while they may look like placid birds, southern lapwings can quickly turn the tables on an 'intruder'!

If you are unsure what a southern lapwing is, have a good look around at the next savanna or playing field you come by. Do you see a few dark birds standing about? If so, chances are you're looking at a group of lapwings. They are about the size of a pigeon but they stand erect on relatively long legs.

The southern lapwing falls into the category of "waders", referring to those species of long-legged shore birds, usually associated with freshwater wetlands and/or coastal type environments. In Trinidad, while lapwings tend to favour river plains, mud flats and boggy areas, they have also adapted to terrestrial savannas and



The southern lapwing, agriculture pastures, particularly low-lying open wet grasslands. The birds may even be found on ploughed land close to human habitation, and small flocks are common on golf courses. Some popular locations in Trinidad where one can catch glimpses of these birds include Wallerfield, Pointe-a-Pierre lakes, Caronni Rice Fields, Kernahan Village at Manzanilla, Aripo Savannas Scientific Reserve, and the Orange Valley wetlands.

The southern lapwing is indigenous to South America but it has expanded its range significantly in recent years, taking advantage of the expansion of agriculture and forest clearance. Amazingly, this species is a recent arrival to Trinidad and was first documented in 1961. In 1974, it spread to Tobago, and has rapidly cemented its status



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO  
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in both islands. Its current range continues to increase with deforestation and human disturbances of the natural environment.

It might seem odd that such a charismatic bird would not have a local name in Trinidad and Tobago but this can be attributed to the relatively short period of time which it has been on the islands (no doubt the victims of lapwing assaults have a few choice names for them). It is strikingly marked with a trailing long black crest on the head, being the only "wader" in South America with this distinct and easily iden-

tifiable characteristic. The throat and upper breast is black, with the remainder of its underparts white. Whilst the wings are folded, the outer parts are bronze with a tinge of green. Black flight feathers with contrasting white coverts (a covert is defined as a feather covering the base of a main flight feather) make this species particularly spectacular during flight.

It has long, reddish-brown legs, which allow the birds to stand and anchor in deeper flooded areas, with unstable muddy grounds. The eyes are large and piercingly red, with a red eye-ring. The pink and black-tipped beak is fairly small compared to other wading birds whose beaks tend to be thin, long and curved.

The southern lapwing is a patient hunter, standing motionless for long periods of time and allowing potential prey, which includes insects, worms and other invertebrates, to come within reach. Its steps are slow and deliberate.

These savanna sentinels are even active at night and it is not unusual to hear a flock calling loudly as they fly about in the dark.

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FEATURES

Bird with attitude

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 But of course, perhaps the most notable aspect of the southern lapwing is its attitude. This species lacks the gentle manners of most waders and its behaviour can be likened to that of a guard dog. This is one of the first species that reacts to perceived danger, and therefore can act as an indicator for the presence of potential predators, to other nearby birds. Very loud, harsh and raucous repetitive keek-ow-keek-ow-keek-ow notes are characteristic, especially when mobbing intruders and during flight whilst fleeing a potential threat.

This behaviour is similar to that of carib grackles (aka blackbirds) which also divebomb passers-by. Lapwings, however, are better armed. Notably, the bird has red bony spurs under the wings, used in fighting and defence.

The aggressive behaviour of the southern lapwing is most pronounced during the breeding season in the latter half of the year, whilst guarding their nests. The nests can be found in shallow depressions on the ground, amongst grasses. Adults defend the nests, unhatched eggs, and chicks using threat displays, distinct calls, low-flights, with a noisy and mobbing attitude. Birders of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club have reported many interesting (and humorous) encounters. One birder reported stumbling into a nesting zone unknowingly, to witness the birds hunched over as if developing some master plan, and then suddenly launch an attack on his position. Another story as told by a birder from a couple of years ago, noted that a football match had to be cancelled on the spot as the players and referee were consistently being attacked by the birds.

Their pugnacious behaviour has attracted attention in other countries as well. The southern lapwing is the national bird of Uruguay and, due to their boldness and aggressive nature, the lapwing is also the mascot for the Uruguay national rugby union team, Los Teros.

So the next time you share a savanna with these birds, take a moment to observe them. Give them their space and don't threaten their offspring. Enjoy their unique feeding behaviour and social nature. They are just one more piece of the wonderful biodiversity on show in our islands.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@tfnf.org](mailto:admin@tfnf.org) or visit our website at [www.tfnf.org](http://www.tfnf.org) and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held on November 10 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: "Fish of the Caroni Swamp" by Guy Marley.

Trump win raises questions about US pledge in climate deal

MARRAKECH, Morocco: The election of a US president who has called global warming a "hoax" alarmed environmentalists and climate scientists and raised questions Wednesday about whether America, once again, would pull out of an international climate deal.

Several scientists warned that Earth will likely reach dangerous levels of warming if President-elect Donald Trump fulfils his campaign pledges to undo the Obama administration's climate policies.

Many people at UN climate talks in Morocco said it's now up to the rest of the world to lead efforts to rein in greenhouse gas emissions. Others held out hope that Trump would change his stance and honour US commitments under the Paris Agreement.

"Now that the election campaign has passed and the realities of leadership settle in, I expect he will realise that climate change is a threat to his people and to whole countries which share seas with the US, including my own," Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine said in a statement. Small island nations fear they will be swallowed by rising seas.

More than 100 countries, including the US, have formally joined the agreement, which seeks to reduce emissions and help vulnerable countries adapt to rising seas, intensifying heat waves, the spreading of deserts and other changes from man-made warming.

"I'm sure that the rest of the world will continue to work on it," Moroccan chief negotiator Aziz Mekouar said at the climate talks.

Others weren't so sure, with scientists and environmental activists calling Trump's election a planetary disaster.

"The Paris Agreement and any US leadership in international climate progress is dead," said Dana Fisher, director of the Program for Society and the Environment at the University of Maryland, said in an email. However, the transition

toward cleaner energy is so entrenched in the US it would continue without federal money, she added.