

South American breeding waders.

Lapwings

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Southern Lapwing © Elis Simpson



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South America is well known for its many unusual bird families, some of which occur nowhere else; antbirds, hummingbirds, ovenbirds, woodcreepers, manakins and cotingas all spring readily to mind. As a result, when planning trips to the region few people will prioritise waders among their list of most wanted birds, unless they are like us of course.

However, there is an amazing number of waders to be found, many of which are Nearctic migrants but surprisingly, there are 35 species of wader to be found breeding in the region, 30 of them are endemic.

There are twenty-five species of Lapwing around the world but they all differ to some extent, and not just in their plumage. Some sport a crest at the back of the head, others have carpel spurs, others still show wattles or lappets and the yet others lack a hind toe. Interestingly no species has all four of these features, but four species have none at all.

There are two lapwing species that dwell in South America which display the following features.

Species	Crest	Spur	Wattles	Hind toe
Southern Lapwing	✓	✓		✓
Andean Lapwing		✓		

These two species are, more or less, endemic to South America. In times past they were both entirely endemic, but one of them, the Southern Lapwing, is expanding its range northward into Central American and the Caribbean making it the only example of a lapwing living in North America. Go back even further than recent history to prehistoric times and we find that the Southern Lapwing did already exist even further north. A fossil of this species was found in Florida from the late Pleistocene period. Originally it was named as a different species, but as it is indistinguishable for the extant birds it is now considered to be the same species. That said, California played host to a completely different, and now extinct, species called *Vanellus downsi* which is closely related to the Southern Lapwing.

Southern Lapwing - *Vanellus chilensis*: Molina 1782



Southern Lapwing; national bird of Uruguay, and an icon of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul © Elis Simpson

Alternative English Names: Brazilian (Southern) Lapwing (*lampronotus*); Cayenne (Southern) Lapwing (*cayennensis*); Patagonian or Chilean (Southern) Lapwing; (*chilensis*); Lesser (Southern) Lapwing (*fretensis*). **Dutch name:** *Chileense Kievit*. **French name:** *Vanneau téro*. **Portuguese names:** *quero-quero*; local names *atalaia-dos-campos*, *Chiqueira*; *Espanta-boiada*; *Gaivota-preta*, *Mexeriqueira*, *téu-téu* (Minas Gerais). **Spanish names:** *Alcaraván* (Venezuela); *Avefría Sureña* (Ecuador), *Avefría Tero* (Mexico, Peru); *Chorlito Sureño* (Costa Rica); *Ligle Sureño* (Ecuador); *Queltehue común* (Chile); *Tero* (Argentina, Uruguay); *Tero Sureño* (Panama); *Tero tero* (Paraguay).

Subspecies: Four recognised; *V. c. cayennensis*; *V. c. lampronotus*; *V. c. chilensis*; *V. c. fretensis*.

Northern breeding birds tend to be longer-legged and shorter-winged than those in the south.



Southern Lapwing *V. c. lampronotus*
© Elis Simpson



Southern Lapwing *V. c. fretensis*
© Ricardo Matus

The different subspecies can be recognised by their head pattern (except *chilensis/fratensis*). Starting from the north, above the Amazon river is *V. c. cayennensis*. This form has a cinnamon-brown head and, more obviously, the black face mask does not join the black breast band. Behind the black mask there is much white on the crown and face. Some authorities consider this to be a separate species Cayenne Lapwing *V. cayennensis*.

The most widespread subspecies is *V. c. lampronotus* which ranges from the Amazon, south through Brazil to northern Argentina and northern Chile. In this form the face mask is linked to the breast band and the head is greyer than in *cayennensis* and shows only a faint, indistinct, white band on the crown.

Next, from northern Argentina and Chile, south to a line between Comodoro Rivadavia on the Argentinian coast and Chiloe Island on the Chilean coast, *V. c. chilensis* is to be found. In this form the head is powdery blue-grey, also with a full throat stripe. The white is a narrow but well defined line across the crown and it has a shorter crest than *lampronotus*.

Lastly *fretensis*, is slightly smaller but otherwise very similar to *chilensis*.



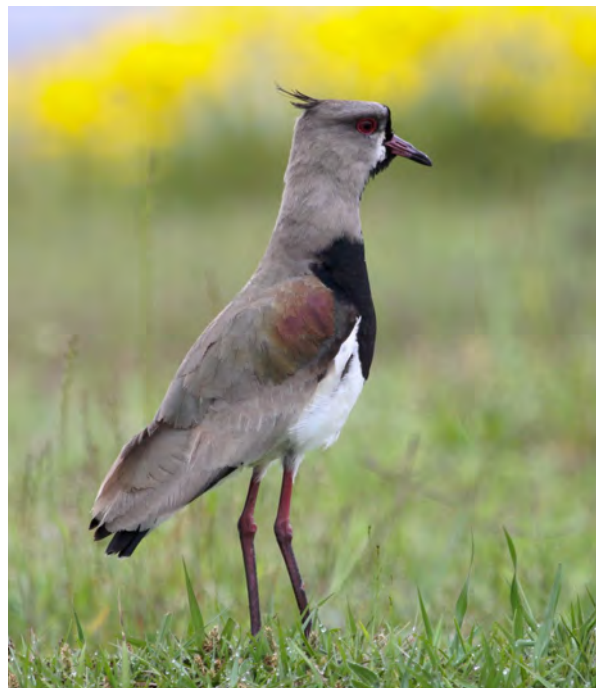
Southern Lapwing *V. c. cayennensis*
© Sandra Giner



Southern Lapwing *V. c. chilensis*
© Martyn Eayrs

The Southern Lapwing is considered to be of Least Concern by the IUCN and is common and widespread across almost all of South America. It isn't found in forested areas such as the Amazon, nor in the lofty heights of the Andes where it is replaced by the Andean Lapwing *Vanellus resplendens*. It is also scarce in the desert coastal regions along the Pacific coast.

It is one of the few species of wader that can honestly be said to be doing well. It is expanding its range due to deforestation. It is a bird that can be found across much of the area that used to be Atlantic Rainforest (only 5% of that original area remains) down the eastern coast of Brazil to Uruguay and Argentina, and across much of the now cleared Amazon basin, where previously it would not have existed, such as in Brazil, Peru and Ecuador. It has also been extending its range through Central America and the Caribbean in recent years. It is now resident in Mexico and first occurred in Trinidad in 1961 and Tobago in 1974,



Southern Lapwing © Elis Simpson

having now established populations on both islands, spreading rapidly. It has made it as far as Barbados where one pair bred in 2007.

The Southern Lapwing is a classic lapwing species and shows many features resembling the Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*. It possesses the crest at the back of the head, a glossy/oily sheen to the closed wing at the 'shoulder', but, unlike its northern counterpart, it sports ferocious-looking, red spurs at the carpal joint of the wing. Also at odds with the Northern Lapwing is that it is quite at home living in close proximity to people, even dwelling within cities in open spaces such as parks, sports grounds (we once came across a pair that had found the centre spot on a football pitch and ideal place to nest), undeveloped plots and airports, where it can pose a danger to aircraft.

When nesting the parents can become aggressive to intruders, including human beings and their attention to strangers is appreciated by those that live remotely where they are considered to be helpful in alerting ranchers of approaching visitors.

Away from urban areas they breed on grasslands and agricultural fields. They perform an aerial display and lay two to four eggs. Defence of the eggs and young is noisy and aggressive, the birds will call loudly and stand their ground or fly low around the intruder until it retreats or passes to a safe distance. Pairs will sometimes have helpers, usually the young of a previous year, to look after the chicks. This is also one of the only species known to have had two adults of the same sex being sole carers for young.

As with many species of ground nesting birds the young are precocial and so their parents are there merely to guide the birds to good feeding areas and to keep them from harm, since they are mobile and able to feed soon after hatching. A study of Southern Lapwings found that they had distinct calls that the adults gave depending on the type of threat. In the presence of cattle the danger was from being crushed underfoot. The adult therefore would call the chick in a certain way that would



Southern Lapwing (*lampronotus*) adult © Elis Simpson



Southern Lapwing eggs © Elis Simpson



Southern Lapwing downy chick © Karina Avila



Southern Lapwing showing its spurs © Elis Simpson



Southern Lapwing chick © Elis Simpson



Southern Lapwing close to fledging © Elis Simpson

make the chick run to the adult and out of the path of the cow. The threat from aerial attack elicited a different warning which would cause the chick to lay flat and trust in its camouflage to protect it, where running to its parent would give away its presence. It was interesting to note that the birds had learned that a motor car offered the same threat as a cow, *i.e.* a crushing hazard, but if the driver or a passenger were to alight from the car the adult bird would change its call to get the chick to lay still.

When breeding is complete birds may move to feeding areas such as flooded grassland or other wetlands.

Food consists mainly of small invertebrates, insects and worms.



Southern Lapwing © Elis Simpson

Southern Lapwing on Postage Stamps



The Southern Lapwing is the national bird of Uruguay. Inevitably then it occurs on their postage stamps (top row). Second from the left is a stamp commemoration 15 years of diplomatic relations between

Uruguay and China, showing their flags and national wildlife icons, the Southern Lapwing and the Giant Panda.

The Southern Lapwing is a well known bird over most South American countries so it is of no surprise that it has appeared on the stamps of Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and the Falkland Islands too. It is interesting though that the species also occurs on the Cuban stamp although it is not resident there and never, as far as I can ascertain even been recorded there. The same applies to St. Maarten another Caribbean Island.

Stamps in Togo have often portrayed exotic species and here they have depicted the Southern Lapwing as the national bird of Uruguay. Perhaps the most bizarre of all though, is the Tanzanian stamp depicting a Southern Lapwing declaring it to be a Crowned Lapwing *Vanellus coronatus*.

In 2008, Uruguay announced a new series of coins with reverse designs depicting wildlife: the 50c coin was to depict a Southern Lapwing. However inflation led to the 50c piece being withdrawn from circulation in 2010 before the coin was ever produced. What you see here is the proposed design for the coin that never came to fruition.

The Southern Lapwing is the subject of several legends pertaining to the Gauchos of Brazil and on the 1st of December 1980 in law no 7.418. it was made the bird symbol of the state of Rio Grande do Sul.



Andean Lapwing - *Vanellus resplendens*: Tschudi 1843



Andean Lapwing © David F. Belmonte Rguez-Pascual

Alternative English names: Peruvian Lapwing. **Spanish;** *Avefría Andina* (Peru and Ecuador); *avisón*, *Lequeleque*, *Ligle Andino*, *veranero*, (Ecuador); *Queltehue de la puna* (Chile); *Tero Serrano* (Argentina).

Subspecies: None.

The Andean Lapwing is considered to be of Least Concern by the IUCN and looks, in some ways, similar to the slightly larger Southern Lapwing. It too sports a spur on the wing although it is small and hard to see in the field. Neither crest nor hind toe are present in this species. It is similar to the Northern Lapwing too in that it has a green back, which is more readily seen at some angles than others when the back appears brown.

Andean Lapwings, as the name suggests, are strictly associated with the Andes mountains ranging from southern Colombia to Northern Chile and north-western Argentina. They prefer open grassy habitat especially near water, grazed shore meadows, open and boggy marshes in the *puna* and *páramo* zones in well watered valleys and plateaus although they tend to avoid saline lakesides.

It is strictly montane in its distribution being found between 2,700–5,000 metres in altitude, although in the south of their range they can be found at lower elevations, down to around 1,500 metres.

Mainly resident, but making local and seasonal movements. The local movements may be associated with the grazing of cattle as the faeces of cattle and horses provides foraging and food.

During the austral winter, it can be found at lower altitudes, occasionally on the coast and exceptionally on the Amazonian side of the mountain range.

Like all lapwings the Andean Lapwing is a sentinel species, giving alarm very early at the approach of people. It is especially disliked by hunters as their alarm calls alert other, sought-after quarry species to be more vigilant, making their hunting more difficult.

As mentioned the dung of domestic animals such as horses and especially cows is a ready source of food. Andean Lapwings will often move with a herd of cattle and seek out pastures with dung



Andean Lapwing © Peter W. Wendelken



Andean Lapwing © Elis Simpson

piles upon which they can feed. Stomach contents show that they feed on the dung beetles.

The local people's perception of the Andean Lapwing is, as stated, that of a sentinel species. Apart from hunting this early warning of the approach of something that upsets the Lapwings can provide advance notice of intruders to humans as well, much like the ranchers in the lowlands with the Southern Lapwing.

Some look upon the bird as an indicator of weather to come during the planting season. The Aymara people of Bolivia believe that if the Lapwings nest high then it will be a

rainy summer, if they nest lower down then this portends a dry year to come and they will plant their crops accordingly.

The typically vigorous and noisy defence of nest or young leads people to admire the bird for its courage and is thought to be a good example of a steadfast parent. Powdered Lapwing eggs were consumed in the belief that they would help people to become good parents.

The association with and procuring food from animal dung is, to our eyes, an unpleasant habit but it draws admiration from some quarters. Since it dines on insects and invertebrates, including worms, it is welcomed on crop fields, and its absence is lamented by some.

It is also considered a good source of protein, unsurprisingly, as most species of Lapwing have been on the menu around the world, at some time or other, if not legally so any more. Some of the original inhabitants in Cotopaxi used to search the *páramos* to capture a few birds and use them to prepare a soup to warm themselves.

Wildlife and plants were often used as medicine in the past, and still are in some societies. The Andean Lapwing was not excluded from this. The eye was used to produce a facial gel supposed to make you alert, wise and inquisitive. The body fat was used to make a cream that relieved the effects of cold and damp. Some parts were used to concoct medicinal food; muscle fat was thought to be a powerful invigorator and added to soups, while eggs were used as medicinal food, supposed to increase fertility in women.

The birds were also imbued into human mysticism and mythology and various parts of the bird were symbolic. The beak for example, being where the noise came from in the living bird, if worn around the neck would impart the ability to see visitors or intruders from afar. The bright back and wing feathers were considered a thing of beauty and drew admiration, and, as such, were often considered a good omen or sometimes a beautiful gift. The leg was also often considered a good luck charm, partly because the birds were associated with summer spirit, a good omen.



Andean Lapwing chick © Miguel Lezama Ninancuro



Andean Lapwings © Roger Ahlman

There is a myth about a mass suicide of Andean Lapwings in the province of Chimborazo. Mythology has explained this by declaring that the spirit of the mountain where the Lapwings live, Urkusipay, associates their glowing feathers with paying homage to Katekil, the spirit of the water in Andean lakes, by returning the sun's rays to it in form of the dazzling, iridescent feathers of the Lapwing.

Other old, culturally significant traditions among the highland dwelling people hold the Andean Lapwing as a portent of sunshine and warmer days to come when the birds return to breed. Throughout the Andean countries, the mountain dwelling people understand the role Andean Lapwings play in the ecology of the region and its seasonal availability as food, ornamentation, recreation, cultural icons and for making sense of the mountain attributes leading to a healthy way of life.

The nest of the Andean Lapwing is unusually well lined for a lapwing, with lichen and grasses used. Johnson was surprised to find them in the rather drier slopes above the vegetated areas and away from the borders of waterbodies stating *'it never occurred to us that with so much grassland available the birds would deliberately choose a barren, waterless slope.'* The eggs are three or four in number and are smaller than those of Southern Lapwing and the heavy blotching is replaced by fine, all over spotting.

Andean Lapwings are considerably less well-known than the widespread lowland Southern Lapwing. As a consequence few photos exist of the eggs and young of these birds. Those that we have found we have not secured permission to use.

The same reason applies to the wider perception of the bird in non-birding contexts such as stamps and coins of which we could find none that depicted this species at all.



Andean Lapwings © Elis Simpson



Andean Lapwing © Peter W. Wendelken

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[Wader Quest](#)

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