

Vagrant Northern Lapwings in North America

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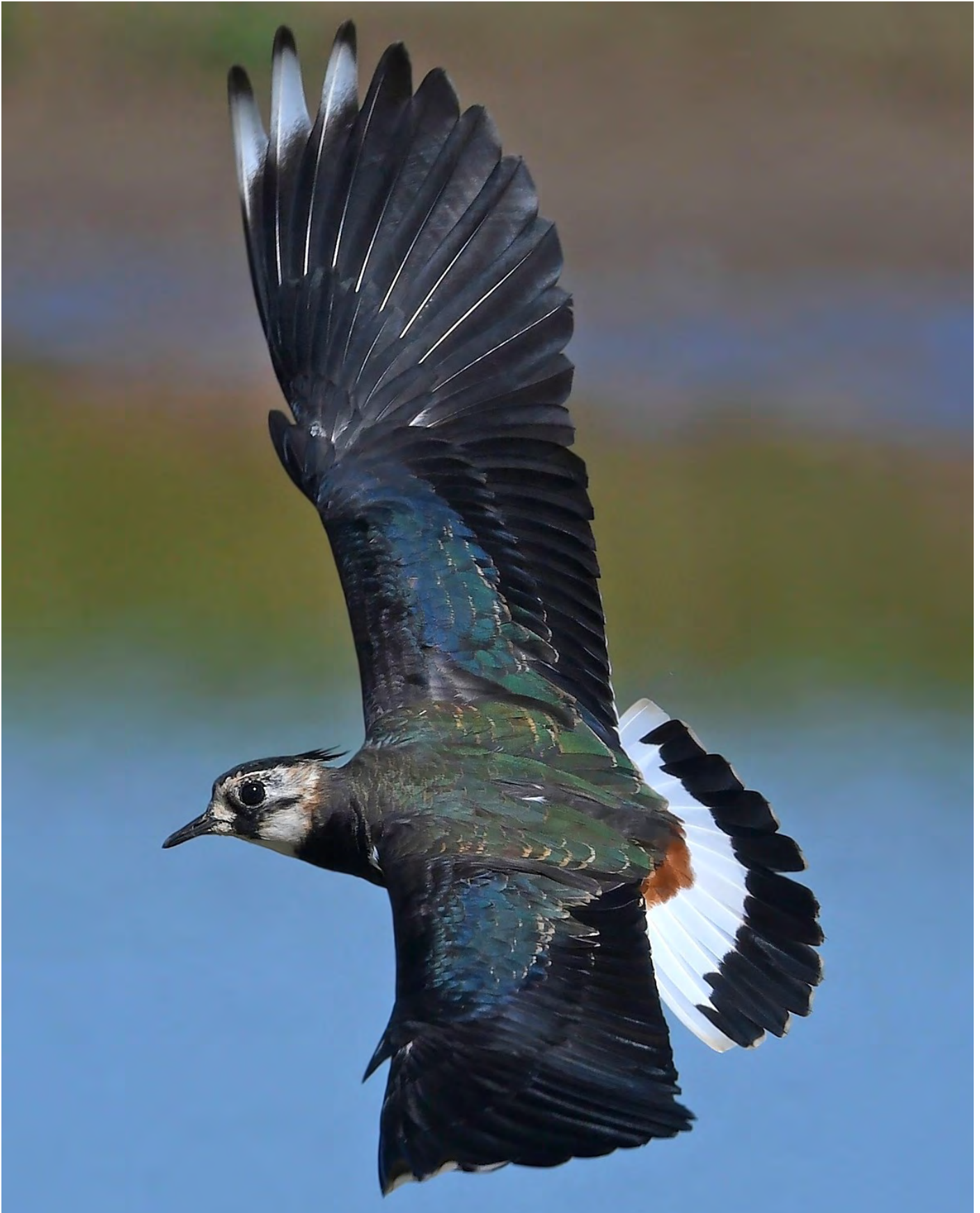


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Northern Lapwing © Pete Blanchard

It's hard to believe, when you watch the languid, flapping flight of what an American friend of mine described as a 'flop-winged mud-parakeet', that it would have the wherewithal to make a sustained flight across the Atlantic Ocean from its traditional wintering grounds in Europe. But they do just that from time to time, with the right conditions and timing. Usually, if that is the right word, they appear as single birds and then certainly not every year, but the winter of 2021-22 has seen a small rush of records of them bringing to mind the great flight of 1927 and later smaller influxes in 1966 and 2012/13.



Northern Lapwings © Elis Simpson

Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* (hereafter simply Lapwing) are not what you would call long distance migrants generally, although their movements do, on occasion, involve some long flights. Lapwings are short to medium distance travellers with birds present all year in much of their range. They are however very intolerant of freezing weather when feeding becomes difficult, if not impossible, as the ground either freezes or becomes covered with snow. Despite their relatively short bill they not only pluck food from the surface of any substrate they also pull prey from just under the surface too.

In the UK in winter, birds will move from their breeding grounds and form sometimes large flocks near the coast and inland on farmland. If very cold conditions prevail on the continent of Europe, then many birds will venture west from there and alight in the UK, principally on the east coast of England. Once the cold snap has passed the birds return north and eastward but repeated cold snaps can see the birds returning and in essence they are like Sanderlings *Calidris alba* chasing waves in and out on a beach but on a larger scale and much slower pace.



Northern Lapwing © Mark Wright

Because of the gulf stream and prevailing south-westerly winds the British Isles are very often warmer than the continent and these cold weather refugees come across the English Channel to find food. In the case that the cold weather is also settled across the UK, Lapwings will, by instinct it seems, move west and this will cause a large influx into Ireland. Ringing records show both British and northern European individuals being found in Ireland,

But what happens if the cold weather follows the birds into Ireland?

As the Lapwing's reaction to cold weather is to go south and west, it can be assumed that even when in Ireland, with nowhere further west to go, Lapwings will set off in that direction seeking warmer climes. For the most part they will either turn back due to the prevailing south-westerly jetstream or die at sea. However, should the weather system allow, the prevailing winds absent or redirected, they can be caught up in air currents taking them west and north. A Lapwing flies at around 45 miles per hour, with just a 55 mile and hour wind behind them they will be able to achieve a distance of around 100 miles in an hour, making the 2000 or so mile journey not such a stretch of the imagination after all.

This phenomenon can happen from time to time and the most frequent such system will take Lapwings across the ocean to Iceland where they are reported fairly regularly as singletons or in small flocks, but every now and then, and in 1927 and 1966 in particular the weather system takes them due west instead, the result is that they hit land around the Newfoundland coastline. There, they will probably also find inclement weather, despite being on the same latitude as the UK the weather is much colder. This is because it does not benefit from the gulf and jet stream systems that carry warm water and air from much further south. The birds then will find themselves in a position of having to move on again and that is how some birds end up as far south as the Carolinas and Virginia, one even turning up in Bermuda.

The theory that it is particular weather systems that carry these birds west is largely corroborated by the facts of their dispersal in each case. As mentioned Lapwings are fairly regular in Iceland and the weather system that takes them there is much more common than the westward flow. On the occasions that the weather system is directed due west then few, if any, Lapwings appear in Iceland despite a number of them reaching the North American continent. In the case of the 1966 event for example, there was just a single bird found dead in Iceland.



Northern Lapwing © Pete Blanchard

The first record of Northern Lapwing in the USA was in 1883 on the 27th December on Long Island, New York. Since then there have been numerous individuals seen, however the influxes of 1927 and 1966 are particularly notable.

In both these years there were far fewer observers and no internet to spread news. Now modern records are easily obtained from eBird. Some records may not be submitted it is true, but since here we are looking at a rare species, it is likely that many birders will make the effort to see any vagrant appearing near to them and any number of them are likely to use eBird, especially in the USA.

The historical events of 1927 and 1966

1927: It appears that a number of individual Lapwings may have occurred on the Canadian coast from the 1st to the 19th of December 1927, however the big flight event happened on the 20th when various reports of birds started with exceptional numbers quoted.



Northern Lapwings © Elis Simpson

In the end, reports came from around a 300 mile stretch of the east coast of North America, from Hopedale in Labrador to the north and Maine in the USA. The latter being the only report from the US that year and being only just over the border at that.

On the afternoon of the 20th December on Cape Bonavista in Newfoundland, Lapwings were observed arriving in small groups of up to 15-20 individuals. However, the following morning one observer estimated that around 500 Lapwings were in the area. Another observer claims to have seen as many as 1,000. Whatever the true figure, there were certainly huge and unprecedented numbers of them. At that time there were easterly gales in that part of the world and the days prior to this in Europe had seen cold weather with birds moving across the UK in a westerly direction. At the same time the weather system sweeping across the Atlantic had 55 mph winds, faster than a Lapwing flies (45 mph) meaning that birds were carried out across the Atlantic with no way to return.

In Canada, at around the same time, about 150 miles northeast hundreds of Lapwings were seen at Harry's Harbour, Notre Dame Bay. There were further reports of 50-60 Lapwings present near Clarendville, about 60 miles southwest of Bonavista, during that period. Yet another report told of flocks of Lapwings in the Fogo District of Newfoundland, midway between Cape Bonavista and Notre Dame Bay. One man is reported to have killed 60 Lapwings; one of which had been ringed in Cumbria, England.

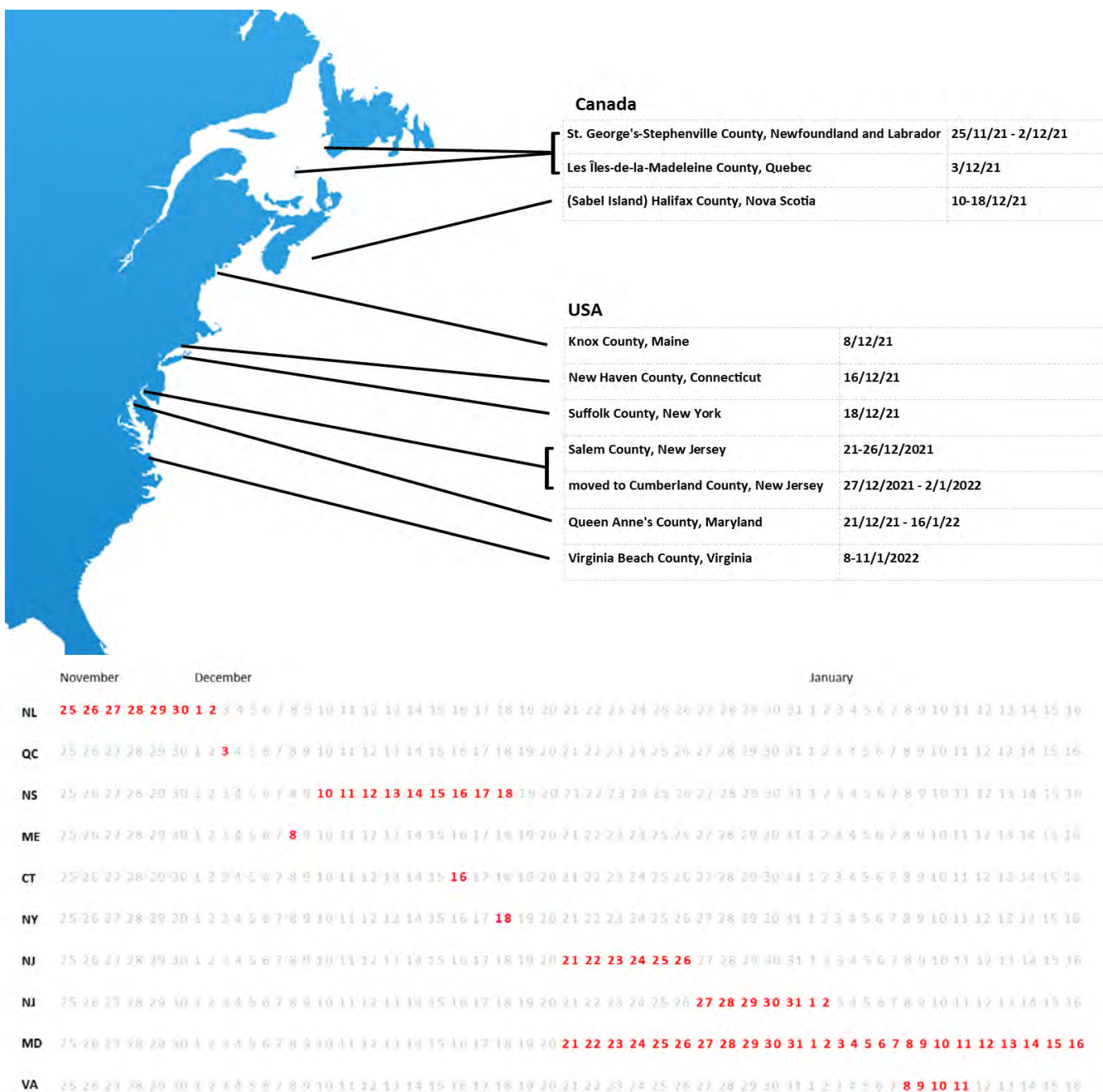
1966: In January 1966 a much smaller, but still significant influx took place when at least 30 Lapwings appeared in eastern Canada and the French islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon, which lie 15 miles off the tip of the Burin Peninsula on Newfoundland's south coast.

The first record was of a bird on the 10th of January in Nova Scotia and another killed by a car in Quebec where the date was uncertain but thought to be around mid-January. However the big influx is thought to have occurred on the 18th when another was killed by a car, another picked up alive and another seen in New Brunswick. Over the following days Lapwings were seen as follows; 2, one of which was shot, in Nova Scotia; 2 in New Brunswick; 1 (possibly up to 3) on Prince Edward Island; 11 in Newfoundland being 2 records of 1 individual, a group of 3 and a flock of 6; 2, 3, and 4 reported on St Pierre and Miquelon Islands, the four together being shot.

The last two records for that winter were in February when one was seen flying on St Pierre Island and the last was a bird heard calling in a snowstorm as it flew over Halifax, Nova Scotia. The observer had known the Lapwing from England, so the record was considered reliable.

2012/13: Since these two influxes there have been many more sightings in North America, but the winter of 2012/13 was notable. These records have been gleaned from eBird and the pattern of occurrences reflect much of the hypotheses mentioned above. There were 16 records in the US and 7 in Canada some of which may refer to birds moving. That year only one or records were made in Iceland but may refer to a single bird.

2021/22: This winter there have already been several records of Lapwings prompting some to ask if there is another invasion occurring, but since so far there have been just seven records in the US and three in Canada, all of which involved single birds it doesn't seem that the likes of the 1927 nor 1966 invasions is occurring. In the winter of 2021-2022 in Iceland there was a single bird seen. This would suggest that perhaps, given what has gone before, this would be a good year then for Lapwings in Canada and North America, and so it proved as far as records were concerned, but how many individuals are involved?



Using the map and table above it can be seen that the three Canadian records may refer to just one bird moving from Newfoundland and Labrador to Quebec on Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine in the Gulf of St Lawrence and then out to Sabel Island in Nova Scotia.

In the US there were a couple of long staying birds. The first record was in Maine on the 8th and



Northern Lapwings © Elis Simpson

this bird may be the same as seen subsequently on the 16th in Connecticut, the 18th in New York and then New Jersey from the 21st to the 26th moving to a new site on the 27th to the 2nd of January. In Maryland there was a long staying bird from the 21st December to the 16th of January and another further south still in Virginia on the 8th to the 11th of January. So, from these dates and locations it seems there may have been just four individuals involved.

As an aside I also looked at the records for the Azores since they are situated mid Atlantic and may be affected by these movements and weather systems. On eBird, in the Azores, single or small groups of Lapwings are almost annual, in the winter of 2012/13 there were 12 birds seen together and this year, despite not being a bumper year in North America there was an incredible flock of 23 birds seen.

Having said that, there have been two years in which double figures of these birds have been recorded in the Azores. In the winter of 2016/17 there were ten birds together on the Azores, only one in Iceland and none in North America. The other occasion was during the winter period in 2019/20 when 11 were seen together and there were two on Iceland and one seen and photographed by one lucky observer in North America.



Northern Lapwings © Elis Simpson