

Spur-winged Plover or Lapwing

Vanellus spinosus

by Dick Schroeder
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Members of the Family *Charadriidae* are birds of the open terrestrial habitats, and shores of lakes and rivers. They rarely wade to eat, but mainly feed on insects and their larvae in grass. Some vegetable matter is eaten as well. The Spur-winged Plover is one of 63 species in this family and it ranges all across central Africa. Sexes are alike on these 14 inch birds. The crown, forehead, lores, and nape are black; as is the throat, breast, and belly. The sides of the face and neck are white and the upper body is grayish brown. The rump is white and the tail is black. They congregate in large flocks during the non-breeding season, splitting off into pairs when ready to nest. They are very territorial when nesting and will defend their nest against any intruder into their territory, be it man or beast.

Management

I enjoy ground birds in my aviaries and these are among my favorite. Only one pair can be kept in a flight and it is a good idea not to mix other species of plovers or jacanas in with them. They are fine with any of the passerines. I have housed them with Blacksmith Plovers (*V. armatus*) in the winter without a problem, but I was quick to separate them before summer breeding season. They do fine on grass or soil. They like a sandy or gravelly area to nest in. They also enjoy wading in a shallow pond, however this should have fresh, flowing water to eliminate the chance of botulism that many of these birds are susceptible to. A pond should be shallow enough to flush with the hose daily. Their time is spent wandering about the ground, picking

through the litter for any insects or larvae. I have not seen them attempt to eat lizards in their cage, and I imagine these are too large for their fine beaks.

My diet is quite simple. I soak Kaytee Exact Softbill Pellets in warm water until soft and add some game-bird crumbles, a few mealworms and crickets and perhaps a scoop of the chopped fruit and vegetable mix that I use for the softbills. They seem to pick the corn from the softbill mix.

Many of the plovers and lapwings can be very noisy at night. This is a species that will not rob you or your neighbors of any sleep. I hear them only at night if there is an intruder near the aviary, such as a raccoon.

Breeding


Lapwings make a shallow scrape in a sandy or gravelly area and even add a few pebbles to it. The 2-4 eggs are an olive-clay color, heavily mottled with brown. Depending on the aviary floor, they are nearly impossible to see. Incubation is 28 days. I have seen in literature that it is 24 days, but this is not the case, and I learned the hard way, by opening a 27 day old egg, thinking it was over due, only to find a ready to hatch chick. Of course it was the only fertile egg in that clutch of four.

The parents share incubation and defense of the nest. If approached too closely, they will immediately fly at your head and face. You will also soon see why they are called "spur-winged" as they carry a tiny dagger in the bend of their wings! Other birds are kept at a distance by the non incubating adult, who lowers its head and charges the trespasser.

When the chicks hatch they are able to run around almost immediately. They are a downy buff color with

black streaks over most of their body. They learn to eat quickly and soon are following the parents around the enclosure. It is a good idea to drain the pond if there is one, as I have had chicks a few days old fall in and drown. Do provide a shallow dish for them to drink from. I usually will add black or tubiflex worms (available in most aquariums stores as fish food) to this shallow bowl. The chicks are soon drinking and feeding there. They will eat the same as the adults, however the mealworms must be very small at first. Some fine hardboiled egg will be eaten as well during this time. They are ready to leave the aviary by eight weeks old, but they can remain until next breeding season, at which time they become just another intruder. I have left them in when the parents have double clutched and they have been fine throughout the rearing of the second brood.

References:

Urban, Emily; Fry, C. Hilary; Keith, Stuart 1986
The Birds of Africa Vol. II. 



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