

# The Banded Lapwing

by Joseph M. Forshaw  
Wauchope, Australia

“Victor-Tango-Echo, this is Melbourne control; continue approach to Mildura airport in a south, south-easterly direction – the runway is clear for landing. Please exercise caution because Plovers are nesting near the northern end of the runway.” These could be instructions for an aircraft preparing to land at any one of many regional airports in inland Australia, and the nesting Plovers would be Banded Lapwings *Vanellus tricolor*.

Approximately the same size as the domestic Pigeon, the Banded Lapwing is the smaller of Australia's two species of lapwings, and despite an official name change, both continue to be known as Plovers. The Banded Lapwing is readily identified by a broad black band across the breast and an absence of facial wattles. The back and wings are brown, while the white throat and black head with a white band extending behind the eye, together with bright yellow eyes and bill, give it a boldly marked appearance.

Favoring open grasslands or bare plains, these terrestrial lapwings are common residents or visitors at country airports, where the regularly mowed surrounds are much to their liking. Also, there is bountiful food in the form of insects attracted to landing lights. On every one of my frequent visits to Mildura airport, in north-western Victoria, two or more birds have been present.

Because their legs are shorter than those of the Masked Lapwing *V. miles*, they are replaced by that larger species wherever grass cover is dense and long, such as farmlands. They are conspicuous, their characteristically animated

actions always attracting attention. After standing motionless, a bird may move across the ground in a succession of short, rapid runs to capture a grasshopper or cricket, and then again stand still while looking for other prey. Although insects and earthworms are eaten

whenever available, small grass seeds are a major food item, especially during dry or cold weather. These lapwings are active at night, especially in bright moonlight when their strident “er-chill-char” or “kew-kew” cries can be heard at all hours.

Breeding is dependent on rainfall and may occur at any time of the year. The nest is a scrape in the ground lined with grass or leaves. A clutch of four eggs is laid. Pale brown and heavily blotched with darker brown, these eggs are well-camouflaged. Both parents build the nest, incubate the eggs and guard the cryptically plumaged chicks, which leave the nest soon after hatching.

In the unenlightened days when most schoolboys had a collection of birds' eggs in boxes under the bed, a



Photo by Cyril Laubscher


*The Banded Lapwing, an uncommon aviary bird.*

clutch of plover's eggs was a treasured possession equivalent to a badge of courage, for it was well-known how vigorously the parents defended their nest. Dive-bombing attacks accompanied by loud shrieking often deterred the less brave, or intruders were lured away by birds feigning a broken wing as part of their elaborate distraction display.

Although numbers of Banded Lapwings in Australian aviaries are low, the species is one of the more popular of softbills, being considered easy to care for and often it is held in a mixed collection of parrots or finches. Indeed it is a most attractive aviary bird, and is inoffensive in mixed collections. My pair shares with a pair of Partridge Pigeons *Petrophassa smithii* and a pair of Painted Buttonquail *Turnix varia*, the floor of a large aviary housing a breeding pair of Red-tailed Black Cockatoos *Calyptorhynchus banksii* and a pair of Western Rosellas *Platycercus icterotis*.

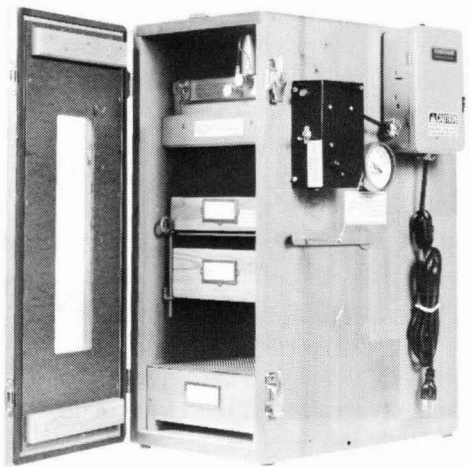
One drawback is that the lapwings are active at night, especially with bright moonlight, and this can be disturbing to other birds in the aviary. For me it is not a serious problem, because the cockatoos and the buttonquail are also active on moonlit nights.

Feeding is relatively simple. Chicken-rearing crumbles and a mix of small seeds, mainly millet and plain canary seed, are available to my birds at all times. These are supplemented daily with a softbill mix comprising one part minced meat, one part hard-boiled egg, one part insectivore powder and three parts breadcrumbs. Mealworms are provided only when the birds are nesting, for at other times they capture sufficient livefood by scratching on the ground or probing into grass tussocks. Their favored nesting sites are beside rocks, grass tussocks or logs. Newly hatched chicks crouch flat on the ground and remain perfectly still if approached, so extreme care must be taken to avoid stepping on them.

Airports and aviaries have little in common, but either can be home for Banded Lapwings. Attractive, inquisitive, and inoffensive, these charming birds will thrive in a spacious aviary with sufficient ground cover for shelter and nesting. 

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