

Red kite

Reintroduction of the red kite (*Milvus milvus*) to England and Scotland has been one of the major conservation success stories of recent times



The Red kite is a slender bird with long narrow wings with white patches on the underside of the primaries and a long, distinctive forked tail. Grey head, rusty wing coverts, back and tail, contrast with dark primaries and secondaries. The underside is red-rust with darker brown stripes on the chest.

Length: 55-60cm; wingspan: 160-180cm

Status in UK

1,000+ pairs, after a successful reintroduction programme in England and Scotland; AMBER listed; resident

Population trends

Red kites were widespread in the Middle Ages particularly in towns and cities where their important role as a scavenger led to them being protected by royal decree. But by the 16th century they were classed as vermin and their decline began. By the 1870s they were confined to Wales and by the beginning of the 1900s only a few pairs survived there. Wardening by committed volunteers, including those from the Hawk and Owl Trust, prevented complete extinction.

With protection a slow recovery began but the population was first limited by myxomatosis, drastically reducing its rabbit prey, and then by persistent agri-chemicals. By the late 1960s their recovery accelerated but, as their spread was very slow, a reintroduction project using young birds from Sweden began in the Chilterns in 1989. This was so successful that this population provided young birds for further reintroductions both elsewhere in England and in Scotland. The bird is now widespread in Britain and is beginning to be seen in Northern Ireland.

Habitat and distribution

Wooded upland valleys in Wales and well-wooded farmland in the lowlands. The original population is still confined to mid Wales. The majority of birds are still to be seen near the reintroduction sites: the Chilterns in Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Yorkshire in England, and Dumfries and Galloway, Stirling/East Perthshire and the Black Isle in Scotland. Non-breeding red kites are now seen throughout Britain, especially young birds which range widely in their first year.

Breeding

Display flights occur over the breeding site in March and April when the pair circle high in the sky, chase each other and grapple with their talons. They build a large stick nest high in a fork of a tree on the woodland edge, often renovating an old nest. They will use artificial platforms.

Feeding

Much of the kites' diet is made up of carrion. They will catch small mammals up to the size of rabbits and young hares, a variety of birds, as well as insects and earthworms.