

The Red Kite reintroduction: 30 years on

On 1st August 1989, a handful of young Swedish Red Kites *Milvus milvus* were sitting patiently in their holding pens, tucked away in a secluded valley in the Chiltern Hills in southern England. Later that day they would make their first, hesitant flights out over the surrounding countryside. A similar scenario had already played out ten days earlier on the Black Isle, in northern Scotland. The long saga of the Red Kite's reintroduction to England and Scotland had begun. Thirty years later it seems a good time to reflect on progress.

It's easy to forget, three decades on, just how much uncertainty surrounded the reintroduction in its early stages. It was contentious and far from universally supported. Some conservationists worried that it involved too much unnecessary interference and meddling with a wild bird. It would make more sense, they argued, to focus conservation efforts on the small surviving population in mid Wales and hope that the species would, in time, spread back into England naturally. There were just 52 known nests in Wales in 1989 but there are now well over 1,000 pairs and they have indeed spread across the border into western England.

There was also a vigorous debate about whether releasing birds into the lowlands was likely to be successful. That may seem surprising now but only with the benefit of hindsight. In 1989, the long history of the Red Kite in Wales made it easy to think of it as a bird of the uplands; a bird that required remote valleys and secluded woodlands in order to thrive. Of course, it was well known that it had once been far more widespread, before relentless human persecution took its toll and restricted it to the hill country. But how would it fare now, in our intensively managed, densely populated lowlands, radically altered in so many ways since Red Kites were last in residence? It was feared that it might struggle.

If there was initial uncertainty within the conservation community, there were also

mixed feelings among birdwatchers as Red Kites slowly became more noticeable around the release sites. As someone working full-time on the project in the mid 1990s, I found it frustrating to hear birdwatchers describe these birds as unnatural, even 'plastic', and be told that they derived little pleasure from seeing them. And yet I understood the sentiments. These birds had been reared artificially in captivity and carried unsightly wing-tags – invaluable for monitoring but highly symbolic of human intervention. For want of a better term, these early pioneers lacked the 'wildness' of their Welsh counterparts.

Reintroductions are inevitably complex and expensive, particularly when birds are brought in from overseas. Between 1989 and 2013, almost 1,000 young birds were released at nine different sites in England and Scotland. This involved the importation of young kites from Germany, Spain, and Sweden (as well as a few from Wales). In later years, as Red Kites gradually became established, young were taken from the new populations for release elsewhere in Britain. The Chilterns population alone has supplied 237 young for subsequent release projects. Conservationists in Ireland have also undertaken successful releases, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, using young birds taken from nests in Wales.

The reintroduction has been successful beyond the wildest expectations or predictions of those involved in the early stages. As anticipated, some birds were lost due to persecution, accidental poisoning and other causes, but survival rates in most areas were high and successful breeding took place within a few years of the first releases at each of the new sites. Population growth has varied between sites but in the south of England in particular it could be described as explosive. The BTO's Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) figures up to 2017 show an increase in England of 359% and 19,069% for the previous 10- and 22-year periods respectively, comfortably eclipsing the population growth

of any other species. Even the Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* and Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, which were also colonising large expanses of unoccupied habitat, could not keep pace.

By the time of the first full survey in 2000 (Wotton *et al.* 2002) there were 0.58 pairs/km² in the highest-density 10-km square in the Chilterns. One pair had eight neighbouring nests all within 1 km. This represents one of the highest breeding densities found anywhere in the Red Kite's range and no doubt a repeat survey would find that the density has increased substantially. In the absence of a recent survey we are left to speculate about the current population size but an estimate of over 4,000 pairs for the southern England population in 2017 was deemed to be on the conservative side by those involved in monitoring nest sites (Peter Stevens pers. comm.).

Away from southern England, the other reintroduced populations remain far smaller but they too are expanding. There may be in the order of 1,000 pairs in total in these populations, based on the latest estimates. Almost half of these are in the English Midlands, centred on the release site in Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire, and now forming a near-continuous population with birds in southern England. The Red Kite maps in *Bird Atlas 2007–11* (Balmer *et al.* 2013) are a little dated but still provide a good, broad indication of the distribution



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Fig. 1. The Red Kite *Milvus milvus* is now, once again, a common sight in parts of Britain, though its recovery has been hampered by illegal persecution and it remains a scarce bird across large parts of its former range. It has struggled in release areas close to uplands managed for grouse shooting but southern England now holds 15% of the world population.

across Britain. It is easy to pick out the different release areas in England and Scotland, and noticeable that, while there has been some spread, there are substantial areas of both countries where Red Kites remain scarce or absent. A drive through one of the Red Kite areas – such as on the M40 through the Chilterns – neatly demonstrates this pattern of distribution. Once you start to see Red Kites on this motorway you are virtually guaranteed to see dozens. Yet, after 30 minutes or so, numbers quickly

dwindle and the rest of your journey may well be kite-free. The Red Kite is a highly social bird, reluctant to set up home in new areas well away from others of its own kind. That is why releases were deemed necessary in the first place and, with a few exceptions, why populations have tended to expand gradually, with lots of infilling before new areas are recolonised.

Evans & Pienkowski (1991) estimated the world Red Kite population at just 11,000–13,000 pairs. More recent estimates have revised that figure upwards, as high as 23,000–29,000 pairs (Carter & Powell 2019). Nonetheless, southern England alone now supports around 15% of the world's Red Kites; there are more breeding kites in and around the Chilterns than in any European country apart from the main stronghold of Germany. Kites have declined sharply in recent years in some of their core areas in Europe where persecution and indiscriminate poisoning remain rife, adding to the importance of the British population. With no little irony, there has been serious discussion about the potential use of 'English' kites for reintroductions or reinforcement projects elsewhere in Europe. Spanish conservationists might soon be making good use of the descendants of birds they so kindly provided three decades ago.

The most sobering aspect of the reintroduction is highlighted by a comparison between what has happened in the Chilterns and on the Black Isle. Projects in both areas started in 1989 and involved the release of exactly the same number of young birds. No doubt those involved shared the same sense of excitement and optimism about what might be achieved. We have seen already what happened in the Chilterns and yet the Black Isle population has stagnated, remaining stubbornly below 100 pairs. Detailed analysis has confirmed the reason for this. The birds breed just as successfully on the Black Isle, and the habitat and food supply are equally good. It is the heavier losses due to illegal persecution, much of it associated with intensive grouse shooting in the surrounding hills, which is responsible for the difference (Smart *et al.* 2010). Supposedly outdated attitudes, prevalent in Victorian times, led to the extinction of Red

Kites in England and Scotland in the first place. Disturbingly, such attitudes are alive and well in parts of our uplands today, hindering the return of the Red Kite and impacting on a wide range of other species that threaten to reduce grouse numbers. It is becoming increasingly clear that those involved not only offend the interests of the public and lovers of wildlife, but also risk hastening the demise of their own sporting interests. As a conservationist I'd very much like them to desist with their illegal activities. But if I were a responsible member of the shooting community (of which there are many), I'd be absolutely desperate for them to do so.

On a brighter note, it is well-known that Red Kites once made a living in urban areas, helping to cleanse the grimy streets of medieval London, for example, and receiving legal protection as a result. Few predicted that the reintroduced birds would spend much time over modern urban areas but, yet again, expectations have been confounded. Red Kites are often far more in evidence over villages and towns than in the surrounding, intensively managed farmland; this reflects the greater availability of food, including roadkills and food provided for them in gardens. Researchers at the University of Reading showed that between 140 and 440 Red Kites visited the town each day to take advantage of food handouts provided regularly by an estimated 4,000 householders (Orros & Fellowes 2015). Little wonder it is hard to miss them when passing through the centre of Reading on the train.

Despite the understandable initial reticence, I think that most birdwatchers now welcome the Red Kites they see in their local countryside. There may still be a sense of regret that human interference was required, but as time passes this becomes less important. The last Red Kites were released in southern England as long ago as 1994. The birds now present do not carry wing-tags and are the result of many generations that have lived out their lives in the wild. Young birds make their own decisions about where to settle and breed. The sense of 'wildness' has been largely restored and the birds are all the more appreciated for that. If you spend any time in places where Red Kites are now an

everyday sight, you begin to realise that the more unnatural landscapes are those that have yet to be recolonised.

The re-established Red Kites may have become more widely accepted but the bird has not lost its knack for controversy, particularly in areas where it now occurs at very high densities. Although it is primarily a scavenger, it is not beyond taking young birds opportunistically when it gets the chance. That is fine when it plucks hapless corvid or Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* chicks from their nests but is rather less appreciated when it raids wetland nature reserves and removes the next generation of Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* from in front of the hides. More research would be useful to investigate the impacts of Red Kites on other wildlife, though any concerns are likely to be minor and localised. Overall, far from causing problems through predation, Red Kites may actually help to restore more of an acceptable balance between predators and prey. Our countryside is awash with unnatural sources of animal carrion such as road-killed gamebirds (e.g. Avery 2019). Corvids, Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo*, Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* and other predators all make good use of carrion to get through the winter but readily turn their attention to live prey in the spring. If the super-efficient, scavenging Red Kite is in competition with them, then numbers of these predators might be held in check. An analysis of data from BBS squares where kites have recolonised to look at population

trends in these species would be instructive.

Artificial feeding in gardens has also become a contentious issue in areas where Red Kites are common. Neighbours may object to swirling masses of raptorial birds darkening the skies above and dropping lumps of greasy meat onto their newly washed car. A few people have come to fear for their pets (and apparently even their children) on occasion while others complain about the repetitive high-pitched whistling noise made by kites or fear that smaller birds will be frightened away. As with gulls and feral pigeons, not everyone is a fan of large raptors and so caution is needed when encouraging birds into residential areas by providing food. By and large common sense prevails, although lurid newspaper headlines



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Fig. 2. Red Kites are often more abundant over urban areas than they are in the surrounding countryside and make frequent use of handouts provided by householders.

stir up the issue every so often. More serious problems have arisen when feeding takes place in villages close to active airfields. The highly aerial Red Kite presents a danger to aircraft and dangerous collisions have already occurred. Licences have been issued to allow kites to be killed in order to minimise collision risks and more will be needed if people fail to heed the warnings and continue to feed birds close to airfields.

Over the last few decades, reintroduction has been used as a conservation tool with increasing frequency for birds (as well as for other groups). Before the first Red Kites were released the only conservation-focused bird reintroduction was for the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* (starting in 1975). Since 1989 there have been reintroductions involving the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (starting 1996), Corn Crake *Crex crex* (2002), Great Bustard *Otis tarda* (2004), Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* (2006), Common Crane *Grus grus* (2010) and White Stork (2018). New projects have been suggested for other species including the Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* and even the long-absent Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*. This is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of reintroductions, although in trying to learn from the reaction to reintroduced kites, I would argue that they work best (and are most readily accepted) when human intervention is required for a limited period, after which birds can be left to their own devices. If constant interventions are required to maintain populations, or if projects involve species that may not have been present naturally as regular breeders in the first place, not everyone will welcome them into their local countryside with open arms.

What of the future for the Red Kite? There is every reason to think that a review 30 years from now will conclude that it has successfully reclaimed all of its former territory. Without the losses due to illegal persecution, especially those associated with grouse moors, it would already be much closer to doing so. Based on the current breeding densities near to the release sites, Britain could easily support over 50,000 breeding pairs once all suitable countryside has been recolonised, almost double the current world population. It may even regain its title as our

most abundant bird of prey. It is certainly a far more adaptable bird than the Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Common Buzzard. It is not constrained by the territorial behaviour that limits the potential of the Common Buzzard (currently our commonest raptor) and its ability to exploit the urban fringe, nesting and foraging close to people, should help to ensure its future in densely populated modern Britain. Perhaps Red Kites will even return to our major towns and cities as regular breeders, rather than solely to take advantage of food hand-outs. If so, the species' restoration in Britain will be complete.

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Ian Carter was involved with the Red Kite Reintroduction Programme from the mid 1990s. He wrote a monograph on the bird, first published in 2001 (Carter 2007, 2nd edn), and co-authored *The Red Kite's Year* in 2019 (with wildlife artist Dan Powell), from which the artwork reproduced here is taken.