

RED KITE SPECIES ACTION PLAN



SPECIES PROFILE

Common Name: Red kite

Scientific Name: *Milvus milvus*

UK Biodiversity Status: Priority species

UK Lead Partners: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Relevant Priority Habitats: Upland oakwood, arable, cereal field margins, upland mixed ashwood, lowland dry acid grassland, upland heathland, lowland heathland, purple moor grass and rush pasture.

Statutory Protection: Red kites are included in Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The species is also listed in Annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive as a species of conservation concern in the European Union.

BIODIVERSITY CONTEXT

The red kite is listed by Bird life International as a species of European Conservation Concern Category 4 (a species with a favourable conservation status but concentrated in Europe). The European population was estimated to be in the range of 19,000 – 37,000 pairs in 1994, with at least half of these in Germany. However there have been declines in some countries. Numbers of kites in some parts of the former East Germany have dropped by 25% in the last 10 years (D. Orr-Ewing pers. comm.). Outside Europe, the species has become extinct in the Canary Islands, is critically endangered in the Cape Verde Islands and in Morocco, is now restricted to a tiny area.

The restricted nature of the kite's global distribution and the decline of the species in some of its remaining European strongholds gives great importance to restoring the species in the Stirling Council Area and throughout Britain. At present, the UK holds between 1 and 2% of the world population.

There is no UK Biodiversity Action Plan for this species.

OBJECTIVES

Objective 1 To maintain and expand the reintroduced population of red kite in the Stirling Council Area, as part of efforts to restore the species to its former range across the whole of Scotland.

Target Minimise and eventually eradicate incidents of illegal persecution, especially poisoning.

Objective 2 To ensure that the Stirling Council Area population of red kites is self-sustaining and occupies all suitable habitat in the county.

Target By 2005, increase population of red kites in the Stirling Council Area to 30 pairs.

Objective 3 To ensure red kites are promoted as a key part of Stirling Council Area's biodiversity and ensure that community benefits arise from this.

Target By 2005, set up a public viewing site or other scheme to attract and educate visitors about red kites.

CURRENT STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION

A scarce breeder in the Stirling Council Area, there were 7 breeding pairs of red kite in 2000. The species is recovering here and elsewhere after a successful reintroduction programme. No map is provided due to the vulnerability of this species to persecution and egg collecting.

Prior to reintroduction, the species was previously distributed widely in Scotland and throughout Britain, but was brought to near extinction by a number of factors but largely human persecution. Red kites were once common in the Stirling Council Area. In 1825 alone, 105 kites were killed in the Callander hills. The last breeding record in Scotland was in 1879 and by the turn of the century the species was confined to 5 pairs in mid-Wales. However, there was an unconfirmed breeding record from Glen Garry in 1917. Protection measures for the Welsh population increased the numbers in Wales throughout the century, but progress was painfully slow. By 1989 there were 69 pairs in Wales.

HISTORY

There are a number of historical references to red kites in the Stirling Council Area. The minister of Campsie Parish in the 1794 Old Statistical Account says "so common is the gled with us that its various modes of flight are considered as an almanac of the weather, and its note is a symbol of moral conduct. We observe when it soars high in the air it prognosticates good weather." From the New Statistical account in 1843, the minister of the Aberfoyle parish says, "Kites are at all times seen hovering around the cliffs (above Aberfoyle)."

In 1876, the famous naturalist Harvie-Brown said, "This splendid bird used to breed plentifully in Stirlingshire, more especially among the pinewoods of the hills around Loch Lomond. It has long since disappeared during the breeding season and is rarely seen."

Further references to kites are made in 1873; kites in Balquidder were very scarce after being ruthlessly destroyed by gamekeepers there. By 1878 they were extinct in the Trossachs after having been common.

ETYMOLOGY, CULTURE AND FOLKLORE

Milvus is the Latin for “kite” and was first recorded by Pliny.

The name “kite” became the Standard English name in 1768 when Thomas Pennant used it. Red kite became the Standard English name in 1840 when William MacGillvary used it to distinguish our kites from the continental black kites.

The name kite is related to the Middle English *kyte* and Old English *cyta*. These names have no cognate in the Germanic languages so it seems as if the name originated here. It is likely that the name derived from a whistling call. Interestingly it seems that the name kite referred to the buzzard originally.

Glede is the oldest recorded name for the red kite. It goes back to Old English then Middle Low German and there is also a cognate in Norse. This word literally means “glider”.

Gled is the Scottish spelling of this and was first recorded in 1420. Salmon tailed gled is another Scottish name.

The Gaelic name for the kite is *Clamhan-gobhlach* (pronounced - Clavan gollach) literally the “forked (tailed) buzzard”.

The name of the toy kite has been known since 1664. Its name is imitative of the soaring of the bird; to quote Pennant (1768), “Sometimes it will remain quite motionless for a considerable space, at others it glides through the sky without the least apparent action of its wings.”

REINTRODUCTION

Ideas of reintroducing kites to other parts of Britain were discussed from the early 1980s. In 1989 a project to release kites on the Black Isle area near Inverness was begun, carried out by RSPB with support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). A similar project was begun in southern England by English Nature. By 1993, 93 kites had been imported from Sweden and successfully released on the Black Isle. Breeding first occurred in 1992 and this was the first kite to have been reared in Scotland for a century.

However, the aim of the project was to restore the species to its former haunts throughout Britain and a number of population centres were to be established from where the kites could expand elsewhere. In 1996, the RSPB began releases in Central Scotland again supported by SNH. Birds were imported from the former East Germany, which like Sweden had a healthy kite population. By 2000, 97 kites had been successfully released and a small number of breeding pairs established. Breeding first occurred in 1998 when two pairs reared five young. Young were raised in the subsequent two years. The local population numbered about 40 individuals in the 1999-2000 winter.

Thanks to the protection efforts in Wales and the release programmes in England and Scotland, the British population of kites stood at around 430 pairs in 2000; 39 pairs were in Scotland, 115 pairs in England and 239 pairs in Wales. The main limiting factors to expansion in Scotland are illegal persecution (especially poisoning), egg-theft and the effects of secondary poisoning by “second generation” anti-coagulant rat poisons ingested through prey.

ECOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

With its distinctive pointed wings, forked-tail and chestnut colouration, the red kite is an attractive and spectacular raptor with a wingspan of up to 150 centimeters. Adult birds weigh around one kilogram, with female 200-250 grams heavier than the males.

Red kites are birds of lightly wooded, open country and are able to utilise a wide variety of habitats for feeding, from arable land to heather moor. Extensive woodlands and dense conifer plantations are not used by the kites for feeding or nesting.

Red kites feed largely on carrion, invertebrates and small mammals and birds. They have a very varied diet and will eat any kind of carrion including fish. In Central Scotland, kites feed on sheep *Ovis domesticus* and deer *Cervus elaphus* carrion (including grallochs) on the open hill, and on lower ground the road casualties of animals such as rabbit *Ortyctolagus cuniculus*, hare *Lepus* spp., hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* and pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* are important food sources. Invertebrates, voles *Muridae* and frogs *Rana* spp. also feature in the diet. Kites are not powerful predators and have relatively small bills and feet for a raptor. Most game managers accept that the kites are not a threat to game birds and indeed release sites have been situated in pheasant-rearing country.

Kites soar and circle over open ground, often at considerable height and frequently gliding low. Once carrion is sighted, it descends in tighter circles until it settles on the ground or perches at a distance. Location of live prey is followed by a steep dive, landing with feet outstretched. Prey is usually caught by surprise, not speed and pursuit. Some birds and insects are caught on the wing.

Nesting occurs in small woods, woodland edge, copses, conifer strips and isolated trees. Kites are not particular about which tree species is used for nesting and both deciduous and conifers are used. Tree species used in Central Scotland include birch *Betula* spp., oak *Quercus* spp., Scots pine *Pinus Sylvestris* and Douglas fir *Pseudotsuga menziesii*.

Red kites usually breed in their second or third year. Kites usually lay their eggs in early or mid-April. Two or three eggs is the norm, but clutches of one and four have been recorded. In a study in Wales, 75% of clutches were of two eggs while 20% were of three (Lovegrove 1990).

Red kites are gregarious, especially in winter and roost communally. In parts of their range kites are migratory and can move huge distances, especially in their first year.

Avoiding blanket afforestation in key kite areas and adopting open structures to woods and forests are the best practices to benefit kites. Woodland edge is especially important for nesting kites and an open and uneven structure to woodland boundaries is particularly important. In general, a varied landscape of mixed farmland, small and large woods, rough grazing and wet areas would benefit kites in providing them with a wide prey base and a variety of nesting locations.

FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OF DECLINE AND FUTURE THREATS

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Some of the factors which originally caused the national decline of the red kite are still operating, but at a much reduced level. This is especially true of the first factor.

- Illegal persecution: trapping and poisoning have been major causes of decline for kite populations in the past. The scavenging behaviour of kites means that they are particularly vulnerable to the practice of laying poisoned baits. This illegal practice continues.
- Effects of rodenticides: modern rat poisons are anti-coagulant; killing the animal by stopping the blood from clotting and causing internal bleeding. The dying rats are very easy targets for birds of prey such as kites, buzzards *Buteo buteo* and owls *Tytonidae* and *Strigidae*. These poisons, often referred to as “second generation” rat poisons, are legal and even responsible use can cause wildlife deaths. Misuse of the substances does occur and this is far more damaging. Responsible use should include laying the baits inside buildings or covering them and burning or burying any carcasses found.
- Egg theft: kites have also been targeted by egg collectors in Wales and this may be a future problem in Scotland. As a precaution, all nesting sites will be treated as confidential
- Intensification of farming appears to be detrimental to kites and this appears to have caused them to decline in parts of Germany (D. Orr-Ewing pers. comm.).

OPPORTUNITIES AND CURRENT ACTION

The five-year reintroduction project is currently drawing to a close with the last of the 97 birds having been released in August 2000. Current work includes following these released birds and providing them with winter feeding, reading wing-tags and counting birds at the winter roosts. Monitoring by RSPB will continue in 2001, but there will not be a full-time project officer in future years. Future work will be partly or wholly carried out by the Central Scotland Raptor Study Group (CSRSG).

Partners which are or will be involved in action and decision making which affect kites are RSPB, SNH, Central Scotland Raptor Study Group, Stirling Council, Forestry Commission, Forestry Enterprise, Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department and Central Scotland Police (Wildlife Liaison Officers). Kites do not yet breed inside the forthcoming National Park, but will inevitably do so as their range increases. The park authority may be a body involved in kite conservation in the future but is not listed as a partner below.

The feasibility of a public viewing site is currently being investigated. This would provide an opportunity to promote the birds as well as being a wildlife tourism attraction in Central Scotland. It will also link with a number of other public viewing opportunity of wildlife all over Scotland.

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WS 3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Plan written by Kevin Duffy, RSPB, on behalf of the Woodlands working group. January 2001. The line drawing of the red kite was supplied by the RSPB.

I would like to thank Duncan Orr-Ewing, Brian Etheridge and Ian Carter for much of the so far unpublished information included in this plan.