

Birds of prey 2

Red kites – back from the brink

The red kite needs no introduction to those who live and work in the Welsh countryside; in recent years it has become a national image, symbolising wildlife in Wales.

Its special significance to Mid Wales is well understood by local businesses and it has become the leading corporate logo for the area. From time immemorial this spectacular bird of prey has soared over the hills and valleys of Mid Wales but its survival here has, until recently, been a matter of great concern.

Until some 200 years ago the red kite was a common British bird to be seen almost anywhere, from the remote hills of Scotland in the north to the streets of London in the south; but then, in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the numbers were drastically reduced.

Improvements in hygiene in towns and cities eliminated carrion as a ready source of food, and the establishment of game preserves for pheasants and rabbits meant that predatory animals and birds were no longer tolerated as legitimate components of our native wildlife but viewed as vermin; thus kites were simultaneously starved out of towns, and shot or poisoned in the countryside.

England and then Scotland were cleared of kites in this way; a few birds lingered in eastern England (Lincoln) until about 1870 and the last birds in England probably bred near Ludlow, Shropshire in the 1870s.

The last of the Scottish birds disappeared by about 1890. By this time the Welsh population had been reduced to a small remnant in the hills of central Wales. Local naturalists watched in dismay as the last few kites were either robbed of their eggs or were shot – to be skinned and mounted in glass cases.



The decline in numbers continued, probably reaching an all-time low in the 1930s when the population fell below 20 birds, and most of these were unable to rear young. In fact recent work on kite genetics has suggested that during the low-point only a single female's offspring survived to raise young. Not surprisingly, numbers increased very slowly in the 1940s and 1950s, helped no doubt by the reduction of persecution during the war years, so that by 1960 there were some 30 or so kites resident in Wales.

In about 1970, an immigrant female red kite from central Europe joined the Welsh breeding population – detected by genetic research on blood samples taken from Welsh kite chicks – and added a new bloodline. With further protection and invaluable help from the farmers on whose land the kites nested, numbers continued to recover so that by 1993, after experiencing a dramatic increase in breeding success over the preceding 4 or 5 years, the Welsh breeding population exceeded 100 breeding pairs.

By 2000, the Welsh countryside supported an estimated 260 breeding pairs – representing almost 1,000 individual birds, including juveniles. If this encouraging trend can be maintained, the kite has an assured future, and after so many years of constant effort by so many, we can afford to be cautiously optimistic. But we must remain vigilant.

Source

http://www.gigrin.co.uk/w/red_kites_were_endangered.html
[Accessed 3 December 2014] © Welsh Kite Trust

Image – © Gigrin Red Kite Centre, Rhayader LD6 5BL

Writing

8. A country park wishes to provide information boards for visitors to provide information about the wildlife in the park. In your own words write a short introduction explaining the recent history of the red kite in Wales. Write 350-500 words.
9. Write a letter to a local newspaper expressing your own opinion about the efforts being made to conserve birds of prey in Wales. Write 200-300 words.

Oracy

10. Topic: Leisure/Citizenship

A country park in your area has a small population of red kites. The managers of the park have applied to the local council for a grant to develop facilities to attract more birds and encourage them to breed in the area. In a group, discuss the proposal and its possible effects on the area.

You might consider:

- the effects of increased numbers of visitors;
- good publicity for the area;
- the possible impact on farming or shooting;
- the effects on wildlife.

Remember that in group work you should:

- *present the information;*
- *give your own views;*
- *respond to the views of others.*