



LEFT: Red kites are very large birds of prey with an impressive wingspan of 1.5 metres. Photo: Elliott Neep, NeepImages.com
ABOVE: Their silvery head and yellow beak is one of the red kite's most distinguishing features. Photo: Mike Snelle

The road from **extinction**

Samantha Woodman of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust
tells the success story of the county's red kites

Red kites are a truly magnificent sight for any wildlife enthusiast; with a wingspan of 1.5 metres they are not only one of the UK's largest birds, but also one of the rarest and most beautiful. Red kites have had a rollercoaster ride over the last several centuries, going from being protected and valued as 'street cleaners' in medieval times, to being persecuted to complete extinction in England and Scotland by the end of the 19th century. Now, however, thanks to a group of dedicated conservation organisations and volunteers they have been reintroduced to sites across the UK and are making a steady come back. There are now over 2,000 pairs breeding in the UK with more than 100 of these pairs established in the heart of Yorkshire. Importantly, the growing UK population represents approximately 10% of the world's population of this majestic bird.

Beautiful, graceful and vocal; it is hard to believe that red kites were once viewed as ubiquitous scavenging pests. However, sadly that was the case and these

stunning birds were deemed a direct threat to the food and agricultural supplies of a fast-growing human population, as well as a threat to game species, which are shot for sport. The use of pesticides, loss of habitat and accidental poisonings may have also played a role. Eventually they became extinct in England and Scotland with only a handful of pairs remaining in rural Wales. Had it not been for a group of conservationists and farmers in Wales who had the foresight to set up a protection programme for the last few pairs, it is likely that this beautiful bird would have died out completely in the British Isles. Thankfully though, their hard work paid off and a small number of red kites were able to cling on, hidden deep in the valleys of Wales. Nevertheless, this did not mean that re-colonisation was possible without a helping hand, as red kites don't tend to stray far from where they hatch. It became increasingly obvious that it would be many, many years before they would start to re-colonise suitable habitats outside of Wales. To help ►

RIGHT: Red kites often gather in groups, making aerial acrobatics displays such as this one common. Photo: Martin Batt

BELOW: The chalk hills, small woodlands and steep sided valleys of Yorkshire suite the red kites perfectly. Photo: Howard Cooper

MIDDLE: Buzzards, such as this one can often be confused with red kites due to their large size and similar appearance. Photo: Elliott Neep Neeplmages.com

BOTTOM: Since being introduced back into the Harewood Estate red kites have gradually been spreading their wings further afield up into the beautiful Yorkshire Wolds. Photo: Howard Cooper



this process, conservation organisations including RSPB and Natural England began planning the re-introduction of red kites into England and Scotland. Starting in 1989 birds were introduced to the Chilterns in southern England and the Black Isle near Inverness in Scotland - sourced respectively from Spain and Sweden. Later, aided by introductions in other parts of the UK and Southern Ireland, the populations began growing at a steady rate.

Red kites are easily recognisable birds of prey, not only because of their large size, but because of their chestnut-red chest, long forked frequently twisting red tail, silvery grey head and distinctive elastic wing beats. They are often reluctant to land, so instead twist and swoop to pick up food from the ground while still on the wing, making their aerobatic movements a treat to behold. In keeping with many larger birds of prey red kites are opportunists, and readily feed on carrion and road kill, and it is this habit that led to their protection centuries ago as they cleaned up the streets. Although scavenging is their preferred hunting method, it is not always an option and their diet can also include a range of small mammals such as young hares and occasionally the chicks of ground-nesting birds. Even when scavenging, red kites may be disadvantaged due to their relatively

weak talons and small beaks and often wait until other animals such as buzzards or foxes have opened up the carcass before feeding.

Red kites were first re-introduced in Yorkshire at Harewood House near Leeds in 1999 and the Yorkshire Red Kite Project has been monitoring their progress ever since. The numerous small woodlands and wide range of agricultural practices in this part of Yorkshire provide red kites with ideal habitat. In 2000 there were only four territorial pairs and one pair that successfully bred. By 2007 there were 47 territorial pairs with 38 pairs successfully breeding. In 2014, 15 years on from the start of the project, the Yorkshire Red Kite team recorded a minimum of 112 territorial pairs, 93 of which raised over 170 young. Several birds from the first release at Harewood went to explore the Yorkshire Wolds around Pocklington and Market Weighton: a pair actually settled near South Cave and bred in 2001, raising two young. Several more pairs are now established in the area, resulting in an unexpected mini-population some 40 miles or so from the core population around the release site. The population is bouncing back, so much so that the Yorkshire Red Kite Project believes that

the county now has a self-sustaining population, which should continue to grow.

Despite all this hard work and determination it isn't plain sailing for red kites just yet. Their habit of scavenging and gathering in groups at food sources puts the red kite at risk of being poisoned. Almost 30 are known to have been killed through feeding on poisoned baits placed illegally in the open countryside. It is possible that foxes or crows were being targeted, but this is an indiscriminate practice, hence its prohibition. Kites are also vulnerable to modern chemicals used to control rats, since they are skilled in finding the corpses of poisoned rats. More troublingly still, North Yorkshire has had the most reported incidents of bird of prey persecution and in 2012 alone, there were twice as many reported incidents than in any other county. Post-mortem examination and analysis from the Red Kite Project has revealed that although some incidents were due to natural causes or accident, a significant number of casualties have been caused by poisoning and shooting.

• This article was compiled with contribution from Doug Simpson and Yorkshire Red Kite Project ■

How you can help Yorkshire's red kites

Since 2009 Yorkshire Wildlife Trust has added its support to the Yorkshire Red Kites Project and this partnership is helping to monitor numbers across the county. Records of sightings of red kites are invaluable to the project as they indicate how the population is doing. Reports of injured birds or suspicious red kite deaths around Yorkshire should also be reported to the project team. This information will enable them to monitor illegal activities, help identify appropriate areas for habitat management work and plan future conservation programmes for these beautiful birds.

The re-introduction of red kites in Yorkshire would not have been possible without the hard work of dedicated volunteers and conservationists such as those at the Yorkshire Red Kite Project. For their work to continue to be successful they need public support and backing to help protect red kites across Yorkshire.

For more information on red kites in general or to report a sighting take a look at the Yorkshire Red Kite Project website: www.yorkshireredkites.net.



Love Yorkshire, love wildlife

To find out more about the range of conservation projects Yorkshire Wildlife Trust run and/or support visit their website www.ywt.org.uk for more information. The Trust is working for a Yorkshire rich in wildlife, with thriving wild places connected together that are open and accessible to Yorkshire people. The Trust is able to continue with this work thanks to the fantastic support of their members, volunteers and supporters. If you would like to support this work then visit www.ywt.org.uk/membership today.