

Red kites flying high more than a decade on

CONSERVATION TRIUMPH

It is 11 years since the magnificent red kite returned to Yorkshire's skies. Roger Ratcliffe meets the man who has masterminded the project.

"THAT one there..." Doug Simpson points to a large russet-red bird with a silvery grey head that is perched on the branch of a Scots pine. Through his telescope it's seen to be sporting a wing tag with the numeral "1", and Doug's voice takes on an affectionate tone, as if he has unexpectedly bumped into a member of his family. "That was the very first Red Kite chick raised from a nest here, way back in 2000."

He hasn't seen it since last breeding season. The bird fixes Doug with a long stare - as though there is recognition on its side too - then it soars off across a field, wheeling and diving through the air. Exactly like a kite, in fact. As a Victorian ornithologist once waxed lyrical: "Gliding along in easy flappings, it rises in wide circles to an immense height, inclining its deeply forked tail to assist the direction of its course, dives with the rapidity of lightning, and, suddenly checking itself, reascends."

When the kite has disappeared Doug moves on a mile or so to check a huge bonfire-like pile of twigs in a tall beech tree where two more chicks he tagged are now breeding.

"It's over 10 years since we returned red kites to Yorkshire," he says, "but watching these birds I still get the buzz I felt way back on day one."

The bird was once common

in Britain but it was - like other birds of prey - blamed for killing poultry and game birds, and persecution by farmers and gamekeepers saw it mostly wiped out by the 19th century. In the 1930s just one breeding female and a few males were confined to a small area of Central Wales.

The species was reintroduced to the Chilterns and Northern Scotland in 1989, then brought to the Harewood Estate to the north of Leeds in 1999. From there it has spread out across Yorkshire, with a completely unplanned satellite population in the woods and farmland around Market Weighton and Pocklington.

The Red Kites Project at Harewood was the idea of Yorkshire Water's Miles Foulger, who initially wanted to base the reintroduction at the company's flagship recreational reservoirs in the



SPY: Doug Simpson, warden for Yorkshire's Red Kites Project in the grounds of Harewood House.

Washburn Valley. That plan was scuppered by grouse shooting interests in Nidderdale. The Harewood Estate then offered the project a home which, says the RSPB's Tim Melling, was actually more appropriate for the bird than the upland fringes. "People thought they needed wild moorlands and forests, like the area the last outpost of the indigenous population occupied in Wales, but the classic English countryside of fields, hedgerows and woods is their real habitat."

Doug Simpson - well-known in the Yorkshire bird world for his work on breeding peregrines - was given the job of full-time coordinator, and over five years 69 young birds from the Chilterns project were released at Harewood. So far, about 550 red kite fledglings are known to have been raised in Yorkshire, with a significant number of nests thought to be undiscovered.



REACH FOR THE SKY: A Red Kite flies out to freedom in the North Yorkshire area, inset: "Salamanca" a one-year-old Red Kite, one of the first bred in captivity in the UK.



Last year, 67 pairs were known to be breeding in Yorkshire, with a further 10 pairs establishing territories. Doug's target is at least 100 nests. "If we could find them all," he says, "we could even hit that target this year." The biggest concentration is still at Harewood's 5,500-acre estate. Manager Christopher Usher says: "We live in balance here, and have always taken the view that if a bird of prey takes the odd game bird well, so what?"

The birds' diet is mainly carrion, as well as worms and frogs. At Harewood, the kites have also been eating lagwings, although there is no sign that this is having an effect on lagwing populations. The Yorkshire project formally came to an end in 2006, when the bird's reintroduction was declared a success, and Doug now works as a volunteer.

Radio tags once fitted to new chicks to monitor their movements are no longer in

use, but they did provide a lot of useful information. A male bird was found to have left its roost at Harewood one morning and arrived in the Chilterns, 150 miles away, by teatime. It returned two weeks later. The bird repeated this journey one more time. It was eventually adopted by the local primary school at Harewood - pupils named it "Lightning" and is now nesting in the Bolton Abbey area. Some birds are still found shot in Yorkshire but most casualties result from poisoning, either by eating rats that have been poisoned, or eating poisoned baits.

The Harewood kites have become a big attraction for birdwatchers. Last week, David and Jenny Gilroy from Harrogate brought visiting friends.

"Of all the birds you see, Red Kites are the greatest joy to watch," David says, "especially when you see the sun lighting up their

plumage." Birdwatchers in North Leeds are now finding they can see them from their own gardens. One of them is Tim Page who lives close to Gledhow Valley Woods. He has seen two around his home. "I never dreamed that would ever happen when we released the birds at Harewood," he says.

"To have them spreading into the northern suburbs of Leeds is just incredible."

Interestingly, "Gled" is the old English word for kite - one of the bird's earliest names was Salmon-tailed Gled - and the wood's name is almost certainly derived from the bird's presence there in medieval times.

If the red kites eventually do nest in Gledhow the wheel will have turned full circle.

■ Anyone finding a Red Kite nest in Yorkshire please report it by visiting www.yorkshireredkites.net/
■ Sick or injured birds should be reported to the RSPCA, 0300 1234599.