

Nature Note

We're seeing red kites more often in our area. They are sometimes confused with buzzards, but the two species look quite different in the air. Buzzards have a very compact outline, and soar in easy circles on broad, stiff wings with a short, fanned tail. Kites, on the other hand, are altogether more elastic in flight with a long, deeply forked tail and loose angled wings, which they can flex to change direction in an instant and dive to snatch some morsel from the ground.

The spread of kites through the UK in the last 25 years or so has been a great conservation success story, but also a striking example of how a bird's fortunes can rise and fall in step with changing human attitudes. In medieval times kites were very common city birds in Britain, scavenging edible refuse from the streets. Their large London population was even protected by statute in recognition of this free waste-disposal service. But eventually standards of urban sanitation improved, the kites' fast-food supply in towns diminished and they retreated to the countryside. There, however, they were judged a danger to the flourishing game interests and they were hunted almost to extinction by the end of the nineteenth century, when it was estimated that there were just five pairs left in Britain. A tiny population hung on in remote parts of the Welsh valleys, but these too were constantly threatened by egg collectors and poisoning.

Eventually the plight of this charismatic species was publicly recognised and from 1989 kites were re-introduced from European stock into selected sites in England and Scotland, most conspicuously in the Chilterns where the population has now expanded dramatically to over 1,000 birds.



Contributed

A red kite

If you are driving along the M40 from London to Oxford, you can't fail to see some floating on the up-currents as you pass over the Chiltern escarpment near Stokenchurch. Our crowded road systems have in fact provided them with a new food supply, since kites are basically scavengers and can now find ample road-kill in the daily slaughter we perpetrate on wildlife on our busy highways. I hope this new role will be enough to protect the kites from what I predict may be the next swing in public opinion, when people start wondering if they aren't becoming something of a pest. They already steal odd items of clothing with which to line their nests and seem to be particularly partial to underwear. And that in turn takes us right back to Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, in which Autolycus, himself an arch 'snapper-up of unconsidered trifles', warns us 'where the kite builds, look to your lesser linen'.

Jeremy Mynott, Lavender Cottage