Avoiding conflict in our gardens

Red Kite, by Philip Croft / BTO

Understanding the interactions between birds and people, and what these mean more broadly, is central to delivering an environment that is beneficial to both, as BTO researchers **Maddie Barton** and **Gavin Siriwardena** explain.

Previous articles in *Bird Table* have highlighted some consequences of bird feeding, specifically on nutrient cycles and human-wildlife interactions. One such consequence is the habituation of birds to humans, which can lead to negative outcomes for both species, undermining conservation efforts. This concern has been further investigated in relation to a re-introduced raptor in the UK.

A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY!

Red Kites were once abundant across the UK, but were persecuted almost to extinction, such that by the middle of the 20th century only a small number of breeding pairs remained in Wales. In the 1990s, breeding individuals from Continental Europe were released in southern Scotland and England, from which an abundant population has established. Overall, this re-introduction programme has been deemed a success: today, Red Kites are a common feature in our skies, especially over certain hotspots like the Chilterns, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire and eastern Scotland. It is thought that the initial establishment of these populations was facilitated by the provision of extra food (supplementary feeding) by local residents in their gardens. However, as the number of Red Kites continues to increase, supplementary feeding can quickly become counter-productive, and we risk turning this conservation success into a 'nuisance' species.

Human-wildlife conflicts arise when humans and wildlife live in close proximity to one another, and when interactions between them are perceived to have negative consequences. Such conflicts can be very difficult to resolve, and usually it is the wildlife that comes off second-best. Over recent years, isolated 'incidents' between humans and Red Kites have increased and are now commonplace in the Chilterns, leading to local mitigation measures. Reports include food being taken from barbecues, sandwiches

'stolen' from picnics, and pet Rabbits mysteriously disappearing. These incidents usually occur during the summer breeding season when adult Red Kites are on the look-out for extra food. As Red Kite populations continue to grow and spread into new areas like East Anglia and the Midlands, we need a plan to mitigate, and ideally avoid, a wider human-wildlife conflict that could undermine this conservation success story.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

To learn from previous instances of human-wildlife conflicts, and to explore what can be done to manage them, we conducted a review of the scientific literature. The review uncovered a myriad of examples, including Baboons in Cape Town, Brown Bears in Yosemite National Park, USA, Black Kites in Delhi and gulls in coastal towns of the UK.

One particular instance involved the endangered Kākā, a large parrot endemic to New Zealand. In 2002, the species was re-introduced into a nature reserve adjacent to Wellington City, where it has since established a healthy population, facilitated by supplementary feeding and the provision of nesting boxes within the wildlife sanctuary. As the bird has spread into nearby neighbourhoods, damage to trees, buildings, outdoor furniture and cars has increased. Some residents feed Kākā within their gardens, and this behaviour is believed to have exacerbated the problem.

To manage this conflict, ecologists recommended that residents 'phase-out' feeding, rather than cease entirely. In addition to changes in human behaviour, more practical solutions to reduce the conflict have been suggested. Guidance on the use of building materials that are less susceptible to Kākā damage has been provided, 'Kākā-proof' refuse bins introduced, and financial compensation for damaged property has been suggested to help to alleviate negative attitudes of residents, and to prevent further deterioration of the conflict. While the success of these initiatives has not been widely reported, all of these strategies could easily be applied to Red Kite in the UK.

ADDRESSING THE 'HUMAN' IN HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

The mitigation of human-wildlife conflict is complicated because a perceived conflict may not necessarily align with the actual interaction. For example, addressing the actual damage to property may not necessarily solve the perceived conflict (e.g. "I am fearful of Red Kites in my garden"). Moreover, the perception of a 'conflict' can vary among individuals: residents who feed the birds may be more tolerant of their presence than their non-feeding neighbours.

Successful mitigation of these conflicts therefore requires an inter-disciplinary approach, including ecological and social evaluations, first to characterize the perceived problem, then to address the actual damage or interaction, and subsequently to assess the extent to which the perceived conflict has been resolved. Clearly defining the concerns of the human population, as well as their attitudes towards different management strategies, will have a direct impact on a programme's mitigation tools and likelihood of success.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Irrespective of the type of conflict, or the mitigation measures employed, a common thread throughout the literature was that managing human-wildlife conflict requires careful planning, early mitigation, and ongoing consultation with key stakeholders (including local residents). Although conflict with Red Kites has already arisen in the Chilterns, there is still time to act before these problems become apparent in other areas of the UK. Work is underway by local councils to better understand the perceived (and realised) impact of the species but, in the meantime, we need your help.

The allure of feeding Red Kites for garden naturalists is obvious: who would not want to help such a beautiful, spectacular and unusual bird to do well in their area, or indeed to get the close-up views that feeding allows? However, it is important to recognise that Red Kites are well-adapted to finding food in human-dominated landscapes and only disappeared because of active persecution: they do not need our help.

Sign, by Gavin Siriwardena / BTO

There are also important behavioural and ecological factors. Firstly, individuals can become accustomed to sourcing food from gardens, shifting their territories into urban areas and forgoing their natural foraging behaviour (as seen in the Kākā). Secondly, like many species, raptors require a balanced diet, and providing birds with scraps of meat may disrupt this balance. Thirdly, by encouraging Red Kites into gardens, individual birds can become less fearful of humans and may become a nuisance across whole neighbourhoods. On the human side, neighbours not engaged with garden wildlife may experience a general disquiet with the presence of a novel, large bird around their houses and gardens, whether justified or not. Actions that lead Red Kites to approach people more are not going to encourage more positive attitudes to nature among the disengaged. If negative attitudes towards the bird become more common, it will become increasingly difficult to manage the conflict and the voices calling for 'solutions' like lethal control will grow louder.

Instead of feeding Red Kites, there are a number of other ways to engage with the species, and to contribute to the ongoing success of its conservation. Using binoculars to observe their natural behaviours from afar is a much better option to attracting them down into your garden. Further changes in our behaviour, like avoiding Red Kite nests during the breeding season, can help prevent individual birds from becoming habituated to humans.

In addition to participating in Garden BirdWatch, other surveys – such as the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey – can provide valuable information about the species within its natural habitat, and allow researchers at BTO to track how their population changes over time. These simple changes in how we interact with the species are the first step in mitigating this human-wildlife conflict, and can help to avoid more drastic management approaches like translocations or lethal control. The ultimate goal is for humans and Red Kites to co-exist within our neighbourhoods, and this requires us to play our part.

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Red Kite, by Sarah Kelman / BTO