

Red kites are here to stay – but don't feed them

THE red kite is now such a familiar sight in the skies of Chorleywood that it might seem strange that I nearly caused a motorway pile-up the first time I saw one! That was in 1992 and I was driving along the M40.

A programme for reintroducing kites was already underway but at the time it was a tightly kept secret, and as far as I knew the UK's red kites (and there were only a few) were all in the hills of mid-Wales. Hence my shock, wonder and momentary loss of driving concentration.

Red kites were once widespread across the UK. However, Elizabethans wrongly suspected them of spreading disease and offered a reward for each one killed. By the end of the 19th century kites were extinct in England and Scotland.

Then in 1989 five Spanish chicks were released around 20 miles from Chorleywood near Stokenchurch. Twenty-eight years later red kites are a common sight locally, with a population of circa 1,000 pairs established in or around the Chilterns. Not only that, but chicks from the area have been released elsewhere in the UK and the red kite is now fast re-establishing a nationwide presence. All this from just 93 Spanish birds released between 1989 and 1994.

I get asked two main questions about kites. The first is whether these large predatory birds put smaller birds or even pets at risk. For small birds the risk is very low since red kites feed mostly on dead animals. They do also

feed on live prey, but mostly earthworms plus the odd young gull, young crow or small rodent. Small birds are generally too quick and agile to be caught. The odd one might get taken but there is no evidence of small bird populations being affected as a result. As for rabbits, guinea pigs etc, these are simply too big to be taken by a kite.

The other question is whether or not to put out food. My short answer is "No". Unlike small birds for which artificial food can at times be a lifesaver, there is no conservation reason to provide additional food for kites. I believe that enough is available naturally in this area. In fact it is possible that putting out food could harm them by making them reliant on it.

Also, neighbours may not be keen to have such large birds swooping down. There have been complaints about children or pets being scared, or windows or cars being soiled.

So let's just enjoy these beautiful birds where they belong: in the countryside around us or soaring or wheeling over our heads.

● **Make your garden birds count!** The author is Simon Jones, Chorleywood-based Garden BirdWatch Ambassador with the British Trust for Ornithology. For a free Garden Birdwatch enquiry pack or if you have any questions about garden birds or want to arrange a talk to a group, please get in touch with him: simon.l.jones@ntlworld.com or 07799 477902.



Picture: CHRIS SMITH
Chilterns Conservation Board

Advert NEW COPY

Wiltshire foods

FACT FILE: Red kites have a wingspan of about 185cm (6ft 2in) and are 60-65cm long (24-26in). They can live for up to 25 years. Their call is a distinctive high-pitched repetitive mewling.