

RED KITES IN DORSET

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(with thanks to Jason Fathers and Sean Walls for comments, discussion and encouragement)



Red Kite - Wimborne - 11th March - Mark Wright

Buried in the many gloomy reports of the declining volume and diversity of our birdlife in Dorset and beyond are some important positive exceptions. Osprey, Little Egret, Firecrest and Red Kite are just four that are found on birders' lists far, far more frequently now than they ever have been. Red Kite in particular has seen a very recent surge in records. Someone asked me about the status of this species in Dorset and this prompted me to review the history of the species in the county and comment on the current status.

George Green's essential *The Birds of Dorset* provides us with the pre-2000 status. Drawing from that we learn that the species went from being very common at the beginning of the 19th century to extinct around 1850. The extinction was due solely to persecution it seems. There were only three reports in the next 100 years. Records started to slowly increase well ahead of the UK introduction schemes which began in 1989. During the 1970s and 1980s up to 4 were recorded each year, with records in more years than not. Presumably these birds were wanderers from the growing Welsh population, as documented by Ian Newton in 1994.

It is thought that the first record of an introduced bird in Dorset was in August 1992 at Langton Herring, interestingly the year in which I added a different Red Kite to my Dorset list. Mark Constantine, Hamish Murray and I decided to do a county year list that year, despite all holding down full-time jobs and living in the east of the county, a foolhardy proposition that I will never repeat. An after work twitch to Beaminster in mid-April with Ian Lewis produced great views of an untagged bird soaring over the undulating farmland.

The number of records annually in Dorset slowly increased during the 1990s but it was still regarded as rare and a great bird to see. My next memorable encounter was in early 1998 when a few local birders were made aware that there was a communal roost of Kites near Lytchett Matravers. Initially it was thought that there were 4 birds but thanks to a team effort of reading wing tags and rings, some birds being un-ringed and un-tagged, we concluded that there were at least 7. Not only that, but at least 2 of the birds were from the 'wild', and by then flourishing, Welsh population.

The Red Kite reintroduction scheme was recently reviewed by one of its project workers, Ian Carter. At the time the project started there were only 52 pairs in Wales (now there are over 1,000). Between 1989 and 2013 almost 1,000 birds were released in England and Scotland. It is now estimated that there are over 4,000 pairs of Red Kite in southern England (around 15% of the world population)! The growth of this population has outstripped recent colonisers such as Little Egret and the less popular, and unintended, Ring-necked Parakeet. In the remaining parts of England and Scotland the population is estimated at around 1,000 pairs. The re-introduction of the Red Kite has probably been the most successful scheme to date in the restoration of a species to its historic place.

Given these events and facts, the current status of the Red Kite in Dorset might at first glance appear surprising?

It took until 2010, the year I finally added the species to my Lytchett Bay list, for the county to achieve more than 100 records in a year.

Even in 2019 it still feels like a special bird here in Dorset. Birders take the time to report almost every sighting on Twitter, the Out and About email forum and WhatsApp groups, which still buzz with records - a feeling that is all too often lost when a previously scarce species is encountered just a little too frequently, such as Mediterranean Gull or even Great White Egret.

Drawing from Dorset Bird Reports it is clear that it is now frequently recorded and has become an expected spring migrant in many parts of the county. Numbers are increasing year on year. A regular pattern, involving considerable numbers, is taking shape extending from March to May and increasing month on month, with May forming the peak. The total number of bird-days recorded in 2019 was 491, the most ever. In 2018 there was a record day count of 58 over Abbotsbury on the 15th May.

Whilst the question of where these birds are going, and where they have most recently come from, is widely debated by birders, studies into the ecology of Red Kites are providing the answer. It is now known that in spring, young Kites which have not attained breeding maturity disperse from the core breeding areas in central southern England. It seems that many drift in a generally westerly direction. This is evidenced by some very large congregations forming in west Cornwall during May - for example 120+ at the Lizard on 25th May 2016. As the population grows, one can only conclude that more and more non-breeding birds are wandering the country and this accounts for the increased number of birds in Dorset.

As with many large raptors, the Red Kite shows a high degree of natal philopatry, with the majority of birds returning to breed in the area where they were fledged or released, despite the tendency for a proportion of young birds to make long excursions in their first year. Kites are also a highly social species, particularly in winter when large numbers gather at traditional roost sites.

This goes some way to explaining why in a Dorset context there are far fewer records in June, and by July the species is once again scarce. An alternative theory, suggested by some, is that our birds in spring are migrants returning from the continent which have crossed the channel. Ringing data (from the BTO's excellent *Migration Atlas* and on-line ringing reports) confirms that this does occur but its scale is limited. To date there have been 5 British ringed birds recovered in France and a Scottish nestling recovered in Spain. In addition, it is possible that birds breeding in Sweden, and which winter in Spain, could occur on migration. Intriguingly there are five records from the 1970's of German-ringed birds being found in Britain, but none since 1987. 74 Red Kites were ringed in Dorset between 2015 and 2018. All these were full grown birds caught using a baited trap in north Dorset. At the time of writing I am not aware of any recoveries or re-sightings relating to these birds prior to 2019.

And breeding? What about breeding in Dorset? Well that question was at the heart of the original enquiry I received. The enquirer was perhaps considering that as Red Kites were regarded as a rare breeding bird, those which were breeding were not being widely talked about. The above data puts Red Kite well outside the thresholds for consideration by the national Rare Breeding Birds Panel whose upper limit is 2,000 pairs. In Dorset, people may be surprised to hear that the situation is very different. Until 2019 the Dorset Bird Club had received no records of successful breeding. This might seem incredible given the apparent availability of suitable habitat and large numbers of visiting birds for more than 20 years.

However, the ecology of Red Kites goes some way to explaining this. A high level of natal philopatry, the inherently social nature of the species and an ability to live at high densities in suitable habitat all act to reduce the rate at which new areas are recolonised and tend to result in a gradual spread out from core populations. In Britain this is particularly apparent in the Chilterns.

Displaying birds were noted at a site in 2010 and we are aware of several breeding attempts since 2011, when one pair built a nest but abandoned it soon after. Since then the annual report has included the comment 'as the species now appears to be on the verge of breeding regularly in the county.....' followed by an account indicating that there was no evidence of successful breeding in the year concerned.

Finally in 2019 we were informed that a pair had raised 2 young. It now seems that there might be 2 pairs in that area. New information from another area suggested that Kites had been breeding there since the early part of this decade. These are the only 'records' of breeding that we are aware of. We increasingly hear comments relating to breeding, but obtaining confirmation of these has proven beyond us. Of course if you know of a breeding pair we would be delighted to receive the details in confidence. Hopefully, these known pairs will be the first of many, as the species expands its breeding range from its core area to the north and east of us. Over the border in Hampshire the population is booming: in 2018 it was estimated to be 250-350 pairs with another 500 wandering young birds (*Hampshire Bird Report 2018*).

There is still much to learn about this species in a Dorset context. At the time of writing we all have the fabulous memories of Red Kites in spring 2020 fresh in our minds....but that's for the next edition of the Dorset Bird Report.

Further Reading:

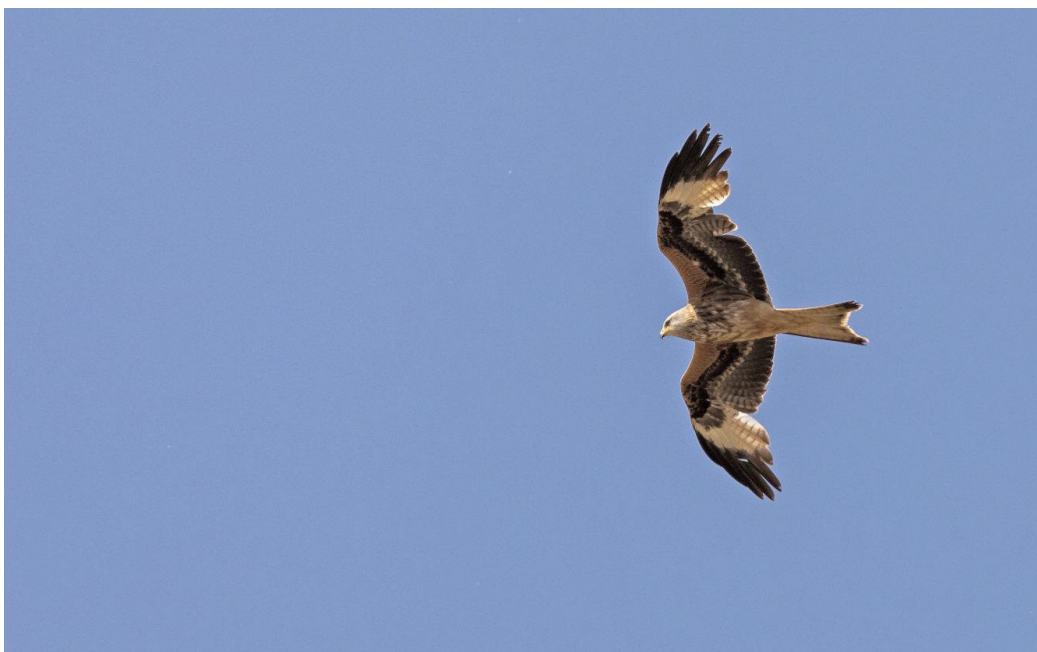
*Philopatry and population growth of Red Kites, *Milvus milvus*, in Wales.* I Newton *et al*, 1994

The Red Kite reintroduction: 30 years on. Ian Carter, British Birds, Aug 2019.

*Breeding status of the Red Kite *Milvus milvus* in Britain in 2000.* Simon Wotton, Bird Study, Mar 2010.

The Migration Atlas: Movements of the Birds of Britain and Ireland. Chris Wernham (ed) *et al*, British Trust for Ornithology 2002.

Hampshire Bird Report 2018. Hampshire Ornithological Society 2019.



Red Kite - Poole - Clare Slade

This photo shows a moulting young Red Kite typical of those seen in Dorset in spring