

## Birds-Seventy Years of Change, Red Kite

In 2022 Red kites (*Milvus milvus*) have been seen in every month of the year flying acrobatically over fields, woods and large village gardens in Danehill, Chelwood Gate and Pippingford. But don't take their presence for granted. It was not always so.

This majestic and brightly-coloured bird of prey, with a wingspan of around 5 ½ feet, long wings bent backwards at the wrist and with a distinctive long deeply-forked tail, was hunted and poisoned to extinction in England by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, when I was a boy, as a keen but very amateur bird lover, I dreamed of seeing a Red Kite: the only place they existed was in a few remote valleys in Central Wales where a handful of pairs hung on, not persecuted by gamekeepers and egg collectors. Though protected there, the climate was wet, cool and not ideal for breeding. The revival in the fortunes of my "pin-up" began in Southern England in the late 1980s when a small population was relocated from Spain into the Chiltern Hills where they soon commenced breeding in colonies, thriving and expanding in all directions.

The first breeding in Sussex appears to have been in 1999 when a pair raised two young in woodland on the West Sussex Downs. From that base they have gradually spread into East Sussex. The first record I have for our parish is on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009 when I spotted a single Red Kite gliding along the edge of heath and woods north of Macmillan Clump, Chelwood Gate. Now, in 2022, there is an established breeding colony of around three pairs in woodland on Birch Grove Estate, Danehill, tolerated (and perhaps encouraged?) by sympathetic game-keepers there.

Red Kites have evolved over many centuries to be one of only two birds of prey ("raptors") which feed on human food (the other being the Egyptian Vulture). Kites are carrion-eaters, feeding almost exclusively on already dead stuff such as road-kill and dead



pheasants at the estate game shoots (and, in harsh winter conditions, on worms, beetles etc.) rarely taking healthy live prey. In the Chiltern Hills they are often fed on cooked chicken by doting residents!

Prior to the Great Fire of London in 1666 Red Kites were a familiar sight in the capital, scavenging on the ground in the detritus thrown out of the windows of the wooden buildings by the urban population. They were recognised for performing a useful "clean-up" job! The London Kite population in Tudor times was even protected by statute. An early account of 1496 describes Kites as so tame they often took bread and butter out of the hands of children.

Red Kites build their stick nests in tall trees, often oaks, and adorn them with a variety of unusual items like handkerchiefs, plastic bags, gloves, newspapers and in the Chilterns even underwear raided from washing-lines. Residents of Danehill beware! This habit of Red Kites was even recorded by Shakespeare in "the Winter's Tale" where Autolycus (a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles" ) exclaims that "my traffic is sheets: when the Kite builds, look to lesser linen ".

So how wonderful that this bird, immortalised by Shakespeare, and globally threatened, with its entire world population of around 30,000 pairs restricted to Western Europe, is now back with us in its historical haunts. The main danger to its comeback is intentional or unintentional poisoning, including the use now of rat poisons 600 times more toxic and long-lasting in the body of an animal that ingests it than traditional Warfarin. Natural England has records of the use of these intense poisons in our parish. I had to deal with the carcass of a beautiful Red Kite found dead in 2019 in suspicious circumstances with no gunshot or collision wounds below its Scots Pine roost in Chelwood Common. When you next see one be sure to give it your best wishes for a long life.

CLIVE POOLE. retired Volunteer Ranger, Ashdown Forest.