

# Red Kite



## 1. Life of a red kite

### 1.1. Courtship

The female red kite was three years old when it was time for her to start to breed and she met her mate who was of a similar age whilst they were roosting together during the winter.

The pair would show off by flying high in the sky performing circling displays. They would fly close to each other and then twist apart at the last moment. Occasionally he would pass a piece of food to her and sometimes they would touch talons.

Generally red kites mate for life although they do not associate with each other outside the breeding season. So this was probably the start of a life long pairing.

As long as a female can produce young kites each year she will stay with her mate. However, if the pair fails to raise chicks they would separate and look to find other mates.

### 1.2. Nesting

They chose a nest which had been used the previous year. It was built high up in the fork of a beech tree, about 15 metres from the ground. It was an untidy nest which the female refurbished. She did most of the building improvements with the male providing the materials. It was built from sticks and lined with dry grass, fur and sheep's wool. The pair included some rags, a supermarket bag and an old sock to decorate the nest. This was possibly done to let other birds know that the nest was occupied.

In March, when the female was ready she laid two eggs. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger.

After about 35 days, in the middle of April, their chicks hatched from the eggs.

### **1.3. Growing up**

The mother continued to brood them for a further two to three weeks whilst they were still vulnerable to cool damp conditions and predators, especially carrion crows.

The male brought small dead animals to the nest which the female would tear up and then distribute to the chicks. Occasionally when conditions were bad she had to leave the nest to find food, leaving the chicks exposed to dangers.

When the red kites were four weeks old they were fully feathered and did not require their mother to brood them. They also learnt to tear the food they were presented with and feed themselves. Sometimes there would be a surplus of food in the nest which would attract flies. The young chicks played at catching the flies in their beaks.

When they wanted to go to the toilet, they would back up to the edge of the nest and make their mess over the side. The ground below would be splattered with white mess. As they grew stronger they were able to squirt the mess further away. They always had to be careful in case they backed up too far and fell out of the nest.

At about six weeks old they started to stretch their wings and practice flapping to build up their muscles. Two weeks later they made their maiden flight with a bumpy landing.

They were soon independent of their parents and finding their own food to eat.

In their first year they went exploring but eventually returned to their home and the range they grew up in and knew best. In the winter they joined a communal roost where a 100 or so red kites met to spend the evening together and rest for the night. On days when food had been short the previous day they would tag along with successful foragers in the hope that they would lead them to good supplies.

### **1.4. Range**

Many birds have territories which they will defend against other birds of their species. Red kites do not do this, except for a small area around the nest site. They have ranges, which is like a territory in that it can provide plenty of food and shelter, but the red kites are willing to share the range with other red kites.

### **1.5. Survival**

A few hundred years ago red kites were one of the most common and familiar birds of prey. They played a valuable role in helping to keep the filthy unpaved streets clean and reduce the risk of outbreaks of human disease. Animal waste was thrown out into the street and this meant good pickings for the kites.

However, over the years sanitation improved, so there was less left for them to eat.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they came close to extinction as they were seen as a threat to game birds and livestock. Game keepers and farmers would poison bait which they took back to their nests, not only killing adult birds but the young too. They would also poison other predators such as rats which red kites saw as a good source of food, but the poison killed them too.

As red kites are so big and fly slowly, they presented a good target for man to shoot at. As their numbers decreased egg collectors stole their eggs.

The last refuge in Britain was in the remote upland regions of Wales.

Fortunately humans have helped reintroduce red kites into some regions of England and Scotland, in particular the Chilterns and their population is increasing. Many of these birds have ancestors from Spain. Humans have a better understanding of red kites and most of them no longer want to kill them, but like to look at them.

It is common for red kites to live well into their teens, and can live for up to 25 to 30 years.

## 2. General data

### 2.1. Identification

<b>Size</b>	Large bird, a bit of a gentle giant.
<b>Appearance</b>	<p>They are a brownish colour with white patches on the underside of their wings. They have a pale grey head streaked with black. Their legs and feet are bright yellow. They have a long deeply forked reddish-brown tail.</p> <p>They have a superb hook-shaped beak, sharpened to allow them to tear meat apart. They have excellent eyesight.</p>
<b>Confusion</b>	Buzzards when flying high in the sky.
<b>Sound</b>	They are usually very quiet birds unless squabbling over food or calling to their mate during the breeding season.
<b>When</b>	All year.
<b>Where</b>	Red kites are not very common birds and you will only find them in certain regions of England, Scotland and Wales. If you live in or close to the Chilterns, you may see them regularly.

<b>Movement</b>	Red kites usually fly in a straight line with fluid wing beats. They prefer to soar using the wind or rising air currents to enable them to circle, hardly ever having to beat their wings and use up energy. Circling allows them to search for carcasses over a large area in a short period of time.
-----------------	---

## 2.2. Feeding

<b>Favourites</b>	<p>Red kites are primarily scavengers and will eat the carcasses of dead rabbits, rats, voles and field mice. They will eat young carrion crows in the nest or if they have recently fledged.</p> <p>They will eat dead wood pigeons or pheasants, especially when sportsmen have been out shooting for pleasure.</p> <p>Earthworms.</p>
<b>Habits</b>	<p>You may see them gliding low in the sky searching for carrion or the movement of earthworms. Once prey is located they descend and hopefully grab the prey in their talons. They will avoid landing unless it is absolutely necessary. They prefer to carry the prey off to a safe feeding perch, or even eat whilst flying if the prey is small.</p> <p>If they are hungry and see a good opportunity they will steal food from other birds, in particular carrion crows or magpies.</p> <p>Sometimes they will feed on road kill but they are very careful not to be hit by a vehicle themselves.</p>
<b>Other</b>	<p>Carrion crows will try to mob red kites to keep them away from their nest and young.</p> <p>They do not need to drink water as they obtain all the water they need from the food they eat.</p>

### 3. Useful words

#### 3.1. Words about the red kite

See if you can find the following words in the word search.

Red, kite, beech, refurbish, maiden, edge, squirt, quiet

O	I	Y	E	T	I	K	D	E	R
B	T	S	U	F	L	Z	A	S	E
R	B	V	Q	K	M	A	B	Y	F
P	E	E	U	U	X	Z	S	T	U
E	E	W	I	A	I	X	G	D	R
N	C	C	E	L	N	R	Q	R	B
L	H	M	T	D	B	V	T	E	I
A	S	Q	G	J	G	C	W	H	S
D	F	M	A	I	D	E	N	F	H
K	D	J	H	K	H	G	C	J	U

#### 3.2. Unscramble the following words

KS ST IC	
TE CO DE RA	
IG FL HT	
TT ER LA SP	
S E S M	
K O R F	
PR US IO EV	
RE FUL CA	
RA RS GE FO	
RE EA PL SU	

### 3.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about red kites have a go at answering these questions.

List some of the red kite's favourite foods.

How can humans directly and indirectly kill red kites?

Why were red kites so widespread a few hundred years ago?

Usually red kite pairs are loyal to each other. Why might a separation occur?

Why might red kites decorate their nests?

If you see a carrion crow flying towards a red kite what might it be doing and why?

Why does a red kite need a sharp hook shaped beak?

Using your imagination, what do you think red kites do when they roost and why?