

A Red Kite roost

Graham Martin
Wagtails, Broadway Road
Aston Somerville,
Broadway WR12 7JF
Graham.martin8@btinternet.com

Red Kites *Milvus milvus* are now a common sight across much of the United Kingdom and Ireland. The most recent (2016) population estimate provided by the British Trust for Ornithology is 4400 breeding pairs (BTO 2024). The population is still in a phase of expansion in both numbers (2232% increase is estimated to have occurred between 1995–2022) and breeding range. This expansion follows the reintroduction of Red Kites in various locations in England, Scotland and Ireland, starting with releases into the Chiltern Hills (Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire) in 1989. However, there were no reintroductions in Worcestershire or its adjacent counties and the present population in this region has become established through natural colonisation from the seed populations further east.

Red Kites are among the more social species of raptors (Cramp et al. 1980). Breeding pairs defend only a relatively small area around their nest site, allowing birds to congregate in small numbers and forage together where food is more readily available. At all times of the year Red Kites can form small social foraging groups (01) but during the autumn and winter months they can be highly social forming communal roosts.



01. At all times of the year Red Kites can form small social foraging groups. Gary Farmer.

Counting Red Kites at communal roosts during the autumn and winter is one way of gaining information on population size and there are now co-ordinated roost counts across Europe organised by the Life EuroKite project based in Austria (<https://www.life-eurokite.eu/en/project.html>). Counts from UK roosts (organised by Duncan Orr-Ewing of RSPB Scotland) are starting to feed into that scheme. Co-ordinated roost counts are scheduled in early January each year. Counts in the UK were conducted in January 2024 across several counties but not in Worcestershire or its adjacent counties. The number of roost counts reported was 119, with a total of 4370 birds, the average roost size being 37. Across Europe some much larger roost counts have been reported, in excess of 500 birds in

parts of France and Spain. However, these high numbers probably result from wintering concentrations of birds which have migrated southwest across the European mainland. Roosts in the United Kingdom are unlikely to be supplemented by long distance migrants, but reflect local populations brought together from a relatively small radius, which was estimated to be about 20 km (Birds of the Western Palearctic, Vol II, 1980)) although this was not based upon modern tracking and tagging methods.

An autumn-winter roost of Red Kites has become established around the eastern slopes of Dumbleton Hill close to Dumbleton Hall in Gloucestershire. This location is close to the southeast border of Worcestershire. The county boundary lies between 1 and 2 km of the roost area.

I first became aware of roosting concentrations four years ago and since then the number of birds attending the roost has grown to about 40 birds. However, counting is a difficult task as it takes place at dusk and the birds' behaviour around the roost area is dynamic. Birds fly into the roost area to join others wheeling about (02) and there are social interactions with birds moving in pairs or small groups in and out of the general roosting area, which I estimated to be at least half a kilometre in diameter. Sometimes birds maybe highly packed in the sky and at other times they disperse, and some birds seem to temporarily leave the gathering groups and fly off towards the trees (broadleaved and conifers) which cover the slopes of Dumbleton Hill and then apparently re-emerge. Birds may also break away from the flying group and land for a few minutes in the upper branches of some of the large parkland trees between the Parish Church and Dumbleton Hall and in trees on the slopes above the Hall. On one occasion I witnessed 20 birds erupt simultaneously out of a single tree only to circle around and then go back to land in the trees. Birds seem to arrive at the roost area singly, in pairs or in slightly larger groups, and from all directions. However, in my experience the birds come mainly from the north, east and west, i.e. the directions of the Vale of Evesham, Breton Hill, and the Cotswold Hills.



02. Kites fly into the roost area to join others wheeling about. Gary Farmer.

The function of these Red Kite winter roosts is not clear, but they may well be to do with pair establishment, particularly involving younger birds. However, they may also function as an information exchange regarding good foraging areas, the idea being that birds may follow others out of the roost in the morning to where they hope the leaders have found good foraging conditions (e.g. freshly ploughed fields) the previous day.

With approximately 40 birds attending, this roost at Dumbleton seems to be typical for the UK, but it will be important to follow its size over the coming years. It is possible that the roost could relocate or divide. Other roosts could become established in similar locations, where there are a sufficient number of large trees to provide safe roost sites.

Watching birds coming into and flying around the roost area is a marvellous wildlife experience. The kites exhibit their amazing flight skills at low height, and there is a lot of social interaction. The birds are usually silent, but a few high-pitched calls are sometimes heard, and Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* and Ravens *Corvus corax* sometimes join temporarily, presumably interested to find out what is going on.

If you have knowledge of locations or counts of other Red Kite roosts in the region, please let me know. The Gloucestershire BTO Regional Representative (Gordon Kirk), on whose patch this roost is located, is hoping to make counts more systematic and contribute to the national roost count.

References

BTO 2024. Available at: <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/birdfacts/red-kite>, accessed December 13th 2024
Life EuroKite Project: Available at: <https://www.life-eurokite.eu/en/project.html> [Accessed 24.12.24]
Cramp, S. (Chief editor), Simmons, K.E.L., Gillmor, R., Hollom, P.A.D., Hudson, R., Nicholson, E.M., Ogilvie, M.A., Olney, P.J.S., Roselaar, C.S., Voous, K.H., Wallace, D.I.M. & Wattle, I. 1980. *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol. 2: v.2
Oxford University Press.
Snow, D.W. & Perrins, C.M. 1998. *Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol II, Oxford University Press.

Images

01. At all times of the year Red Kites can form small social foraging groups. Gary Farmer.
02. Kites fly into the roost area to join others wheeling about. Gary Farmer.