

## Red Kite Facts

Scientific name: *Milvus milvus*

Length: 60 – 65cm (males are slightly smaller than females)

Wingspan: 150 – 170cm

Weight: 0.7 – 1kg

Can live for up to 25 years

What does the red kite look like?

The red kite has a grey/white head with a reddish-brown body and a deeply forked tail. It is slightly larger than a buzzard and has longer wings. When it hunts, it soars with its wings pushed forward and tail always moving.

How does it sound?

The red kite has a mew-like “weoo-weoo-weoo” call, which is rapidly repeated.

World distribution:

In the UK, red kites can now be found in the Chilterns, mid-Wales, north Scotland, central Scotland, east Midlands and Yorkshire. All these populations, except the one in Wales, are the result of re-introductions.

Worldwide, they can be found in parts of Europe, the Middle East and along the north African coast.

Breeding:

Kites may breed at 2 to 3 years old. In March, they begin to spend more time in suitable nesting areas. They will use nests abandoned by other birds, or will build their own in tall trees. Although easily disturbed by people, kites do not mind other pairs of kites nearby. The nests are made from large sticks and are normally lined with wool, which the birds collect along with other unusual items such as pieces of plastic and sometimes even items of clothing.

By mid-April the female lays up to 4 white eggs, flecked with light brown, which usually hatch after 34 days. The young are ready to fly after 48-50 days, but still stay with their parents for a further 7-10 days.

### Feeding Habits:

Red kites eat mainly dead animals that they are able to find (carrion), being too weak-footed to kill any prey much bigger than a small rabbit. They will also feed on chicks, small mammals and invertebrates such as beetles and earthworms.

The kite hunts by flying low over open country, using the forked tail to steer, twisting it like a rudder. Live prey is usually caught by surprise rather than speed, although kites sometimes make fast, twisting chases.

### The Kite's Countryside:

Kites prefer hilly country, where woodland and open grassland occur close together. The Chilterns, with its rolling hills, woodlands, chalk downland and varied farmland, provides ideal areas for the birds to nest and feed. Many local farmers are managing their land to benefit wildlife.

### What the Law Says:

Red kites are protected at all times. It is illegal to disturb the birds while they are nesting or at any other time.

### Helping the Red Kite:

Red kites disappeared in England by the end of the nineteenth century because of human actions. They were killed in the belief that they attacked lambs and gamebirds (e.g. pheasants). In fact, they pose no threat to sheep farming or game rearing, although they will eat dead lambs and pheasants.

A few pairs survived in Wales. In 1989 a plan to bring the red kite back to England and Scotland was begun. Between 1989 and 1993, chicks from Spain and Sweden were released at specially protected sites and allowed to fly free.

### Threats:

Although red kites are breeding successfully in the Chiltern Hills, they are still under threat in Great Britain. Changes in the law and attitudes towards birds of prey mean that red kites are no longer killed for the same reasons that they once were. Cases of shooting, poisoning and egg theft do still occur, though less often than in the past.