

Welcome to

RED KITES

in Rockingham

Forest

This pack is full of information and activities about the wildlife of the Rockingham Forest and particularly the spectacular red kite, which has been re-introduced into this beautiful landscape.

All activities are linked to the National Curriculum.

Come and see the red kites for yourself. School visits are to Top Lodge, Fineshade, near Corby, Northants.

To book tel: 01780 444394.

Visits led by trained RSPB and Forestry Commission staff.

Look out for Rusty!



Rusty pops up throughout the pages to help and guide your pupils

Contents:

Fact sheets

Red kite facts	1
Red kite re-introduction	3
The Rockingham Forest	5
• <i>Rockingham Forest woodland</i>	6
• <i>Wildlife in Rockingham Forest</i>	7
• <i>Traditional buildings in the East Midlands</i>	8
Birds of prey	9
Woodland birds	11
Glossary	15
• <i>Defines words italicised in the text</i>	

Activity sheets

English and History	
• <i>The return of the red kite and time line</i>	17
• <i>Desirable residences</i>	19
• <i>Poetry ideas</i>	21
Mathematics	
• <i>The progress of the red kite – data handling and averages</i>	23
• <i>Comparing wingspans – data handling</i>	25
Science	
• <i>Adaptation, hunting and feeding</i>	27
• <i>Food webs</i>	32
• <i>Website activity</i>	35
Geography	
• <i>A perfect place to live</i>	37
• <i>Spreading their wings</i>	40
• <i>Close to home</i>	43
Dance	
• <i>The kite's tale</i>	45
Craft	
• <i>Flapping red kite</i>	46
• <i>Finger puppet</i>	47
• <i>Red kite mobile</i>	48
Table of NC Links	53

Produced and published by The RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL.

Illustrations by: Alasdair Bright, John Busby, Mike Langman and Dan Powell. Thanks to Ian Carter from English Nature for help in developing this pack.

RSPB regd charity no 207076

88-1177-02-03



Red Kite

FACT FILE

Scientific name: *Milvus milvus*

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

Wingspan: 175–195 cm

Weight: Up to 1.2 kg

Lifespan: Can live for up to 25 years but average life expectancy in the wild is 8–10 years

Other names: *Glada* – Swedish word for kites, *Puttock* – old English word for kites and buzzards used in the Midlands, *Scoul* – Cornish name, *Crotchtail* – name used in Essex, *Barcud* – Welsh name.

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 foraging for food, 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 Rockingham Forest, mid-Wales, north Scotland, central Scotland, south Scotland, the Chilterns and Yorkshire. All these birds, except those in Wales, have been re-introduced.

Outside the UK, they can be found in parts of Europe, and a few along the north African coast.

Breeding:

Kites normally breed at two to three 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. The birds collect sheep's wool, which is often caught in fences and brambles, as well as other, more unusual items to make up their nests, such as pieces of plastic and sometimes even items of clothing.



By mid-April, the female lays up to four white eggs, flecked with light brown. These usually hatch after 30–32 days. The young are ready to fly when they are 48–50 days old, but depend on their parents for food for a further two to four weeks.

Feeding habits:

Red kites eat mainly dead animals that they are able to find (*carrion*) – their feet are too weak 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 finds food by flying low over open country. It uses its 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 are adaptable – they can live in a wide variety of countryside. The rolling hills, woodlands and varied farmland of Rockingham Forest provide 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 from England and Scotland by the end of the 19th century because of humans. People killed them in the belief that they attacked lambs and *game birds* (eg pheasants). In fact, kites pose no threat to sheep farming or game rearing, although they will eat dead lambs and pheasants.

A few pairs of red kites 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. Since then, birds taken from Spain and also from these first relocation sites in Britain have been released in four other places.

Threats:

Although red kites are breeding successfully in many areas, they are still under threat in Great Britain as a whole. Causes of death include being hit by vehicles, electrocution on power lines, shooting, poisoning and egg collecting. Birds may also die through eating rats killed with rat poison. If they feed a poisoned rat to their young, all the red kite chicks may die.

Changes in the law and attitudes towards birds of prey means that deliberate persecution is much less common than in the past.

Red Kite Re-introduction



Before...

During *medieval* times, the red kite was one of the most common birds of prey in Great Britain. They were often seen scavenging in towns and villages, as well as in the countryside. They were protected because they helped to keep the streets clean.

In Tudor times, the streets were cobbled and became much cleaner. Kite numbers started to drop because there wasn't as much food for them. Then, in the 1560s, red kites were added to a list of animals and birds classed as *vermin*. People were encouraged to kill them and were even paid for each kite head. Not surprisingly, their numbers dropped again.

In Victorian times, shooting *game birds* like pheasants and partridges became a popular pastime. Gamekeepers thought

red kites killed their *game birds* and farmers thought they killed their lambs. Although this was not true, red kites were shot and poisoned until, by the end of the 19th century, they had disappeared from England and Scotland. Only a few pairs survived, in the valleys of mid-Wales.

A Kite Committee was set up in 1904 to protect these Welsh birds, and farmers were paid to protect red kites nesting on their land. Slowly the Welsh *population* started to recover. By 1992, there were 79 nesting pairs and by 2000, this number had risen to over 250 pairs.

The recovery of the kites in Wales was very slow, probably because rainfall was high and the countryside did not provide much food. The birds had only managed to survive here because the area was so remote.

Red Kite Re-introduction

...and after

It was thought that the kite *population* would take a very long time to recover to its former levels naturally, so in 1989 the Nature Conservancy Council and the RSPB started a re-introduction programme in England and Scotland.

The Chiltern Hills and later Rockingham Forest were both chosen as English re-introduction sites because the landscapes were very similar to parts of Europe where kites were common. The area was also known to be protected and rich in wildlife.

Between 1995 and 1998, a total of 70 young birds were brought to Rockingham Forest in the East Midlands from Spain and from the successfully reintroduced *population* in the Chilterns, near London. They were reared in special cages, or aviaries, at the release site in the forest, until they were fully grown and ready for release.



People provided the kites' food while they were in the aviaries, but were careful not to have too much contact with the birds, so that they would not become tame. When the kites were strong enough to fly, and ready for release, they were fitted with coloured plastic wing tags to make them easy to identify, and with small radio transmitters so their movements could be tracked.



After they were released from the aviaries, the kites were still fed for a few weeks until they had got used to their new home.

Some of the birds stayed close to the release site, but others travelled a long way and then made their way back.

The released birds first started to breed in 1996 and, since then, their numbers have increased dramatically. The number of young produced has almost doubled every two years. In 2002, 22 breeding pairs produced 42 young.

Every June the nests are checked and all young kites are fitted with wing tags. A different colour is used each year to make it easy to see how old the bird is, wherever it is seen.

Because so many young kites have now been reared in the first relocation areas, some have been taken for the more recent re-introduction schemes in Yorkshire and Scotland. The kites in these new areas should breed when they are two to three years old.

The re-introduction of red kites to England is one of the greatest conservation success stories of all time.