

H E L P I N G

RED KITES

A good practice guide for landowners in England

The red kite is a beautiful bird with a five-foot wingspan.

It is easily identified by its russet, black and grey plumage and deeply forked tail. In Britain this spectacular bird of prey was once a common sight, but it was nearly wiped out by human persecution in the nineteenth century.



Thanks to changing attitudes and intensive conservation efforts, red kites are once again a familiar sight in many parts of the UK.

The red kite reintroduction programme has proved to be one of the greatest British conservation success stories of recent years, but these lovely birds are still at risk from poisoning and other threats. This guide outlines the main threats to red kites and what you can do to minimise them.



Pic: Neil Wasp / Northern Kites

1 FEEDING RED KITES

In the wild, red kites feed on all parts of dead animals and need calcium from bones in order to develop properly and stay healthy. Many people like to feed red kites as they want to help conserve them and enjoy seeing them on their land. However in areas with high prey densities such as the Chilterns, it is not necessary to do this. If red kites do not have a balanced diet they can suffer from serious dietary deficiencies, which may even lead to death in some cases.

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If you DO decide to feed red kites, following these guidelines will help to ensure that any problems associated with supplementary feeding are minimised:



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MINIMISING THE RISK OF LEAD POISONING

Analysis of dead red kites by the Zoological Society of London has shown that some red kites are dying of lead poisoning. These deaths are a consequence of red kites eating shot animals which contain fragments of lead.

Lead is an extremely toxic substance and even small amounts can cause severe health problems. It is therefore essential to avoid feeding red kites animal carcasses that have been shot unless you are absolutely certain that the ammunition used did not contain any lead.

People who are shooting for recreation or pest control should be encouraged to use lead-free pellets or bullets as a precautionary measure, to minimise the risk of poisoning to red kites and other wildlife.

The use of lead free bullets and shotgun cartridges in areas where red kites are present would reduce the risk of accidental poisoning.

Preferably, feed only whole small animal carcasses such as voles, mice or rats.

Do not feed road casualties as they may have been poisoned.

Only put out small amounts of food. This will help to ensure that red kites will not become dependent on the food you are supplying, and will continue to feed naturally.

Carry out feeding in the afternoons where possible. This gives red kites the opportunity to feed naturally in the mornings.

Remove any remaining carcasses at the end of the day, in order to prevent other wild animals from eating it.

Do not feed processed meats (which have potentially harmful additives).

If you feed sections of large carcasses or butchers offcuts, make sure that you cover the meat with a bonemeal supplement. This will provide the calcium that red kites need for healthy bone growth.

Do not increase the amount of food you put out when more kites visit – this will prevent artificially high numbers of kites visiting your area.

Do not feed captive-bred bird carcasses (for example chicken) unless they have been declared fit for human consumption, as feeding captive-bred birds to red kites increases the risk of diseases such as avian flu being transmitted.

Ensure that livestock cannot get access to carcasses in order to minimise the risk of disease transmission.

Regularly wash and disinfect all containers and equipment used for feeding red kites.

All feeding activities must meet the Animal By-Product Regulations. Check with your local Environmental Health Officer before commencing feeding.

MINIMISING THE RISK

Red kites and other birds of prey are very susceptible to secondary poisoning as they will eat poisoned rodents and ingest the poisons they contain. These poisons may kill the kite immediately, or they may accumulate in the body and cause eventual death. The so-called 'second generation' anticoagulant rodenticides are particularly toxic to red kites and other wildlife and products containing Bromadiolone, Difenacoum, Brodifacoum or Flocoumafen should be avoided if possible.

Preventing rodents is better than dealing with a rodent problem after it has arisen. Deter rodents from your property by:

1. Keeping foodstuffs and refuse in rodent-proof containers.
2. Making sure any food spills are cleaned up immediately.
3. Proofing buildings to prevent rodents getting in.
4. Removing cover for rodents (for example by sealing sheds and barns, and removing shrubs and undergrowth adjacent to your property).
5. Painting gloss on outside walls to prevent climbing by rodents (a 6 inch wide continuous strip painted 3ft above ground level on brick or smooth render should be effective).
6. Fitting metal kick plates to prevent gnawing at the bottom of doors.
7. Fitting circular metal guards around pipes.
8. Attracting predators such as barn owls to your property. (contact organisations such as your local Wildlife Trust, the Hawk and Owl Trust or the RSPB for further information).

ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF PEST CONTROL

If preventative methods are insufficient try an alternative method of pest control to rodenticides. The best form of rodent control to use will depend on your exact situation so take expert advice from your Local Council or a pest control company, explaining that you wish to avoid poisoning wildlife. Examples of alternative methods to control rodents include:

1. Live trapping (live box or curiosity traps).

These traps require daily checking to ensure the welfare of trapped rodents is not compromised.

2. Snap trapping (break-back traps).

3. Carbon dioxide chambers.

If used carefully these methods can be effective control methods in some situations, and pose no threat to red kites.



If you feel that it is absolutely necessary to use rodenticides, follow these guidelines:

1. Always follow product instructions.
2. Preferentially use 'first generation' rodenticides (such as those based on warfarin, coumatetralyl or chlorophacinone), which are less toxic to wildlife.
3. Carry out regular searches for dead rodents and dispose of them safely by burning or burying.
4. Only put rodenticides out in areas of rodent infestation (carry out a survey prior to treatment to assess where the main problem areas are).
5. Use poisoned bait only in the amounts required to achieve control and only for as long as necessary to achieve satisfactory control, or you will be causing unnecessary harm to wildlife.
6. Make sure that bait is sufficiently protected to avoid accidentally poisoning other animals.



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WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND A SICK, INJURED OR DEAD RED KITE

If the bird is injured but appears relatively healthy, place it gently in a box and keep it quiet, dark and cool. It may be that the bird is in shock and will soon recover (at which time you can let it go).

If it is more seriously injured or ill, contact Raptor Rescue, the RSPCA, the RSPB, your local vet or a local animal rescue centre as soon as possible. Keep the bird warm to prevent circulatory shock. If you find a dead red kite please phone your local police Wildlife Crime Officer or the RSPB immediately. If you suspect poisoning, call DEFRA's Campaign Against Illegal Poisoning on 0800 321 600. Do not move the bird as it may have been poisoned, but do make a note of any colours and marks of leg rings or wing tags (noting which wing the tags are on). If you have a camera take pictures of the bird and its surroundings.

If you are asked to collect the bird, be careful not to touch it with your bare hands. Put in two tightly closed plastic bags and store it in a cool place, preferably a fridge. Do not freeze the bird as this may affect future tests. You will be advised how to send it for post-mortem examination.

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WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND AN ABANDONED RED KITE CHICK

A young bird alone on the ground has not necessarily been abandoned, so the best course of action initially is to leave it alone. Immediately contact the RSPB, Raptor Rescue or your local Red Kite Officer (if you have one) for advice. If the bird is in a vulnerable position you can move it into shelter (ideally onto a perch well off the ground), but not too far away as the parents will be unable to find it. Don't worry about touching the bird as this will not make the parents abandon it.



Pic: Chris Gomerstaff / RSPB

CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

DEFRA: Freephone 0800 321 600

Zoological Society of London (ZSL): 020 7449 6668

English Nature: 01733 455000

RSPB: 01767 680551

Chilterns Conservation Board: 01844 355506

The Welsh Kite Trust: 01597 825981

Raptor Rescue: 0870 241 0609

The Hawk and Owl Trust: 0870 990 3889



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