

Red Kites in Shropshire 2020



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Introduction

The Welsh Kite Trust and the Shropshire Raptor Study Group intended to try to find the nests of all breeding pairs of Red Kite in 2020, but efforts were severely hampered by the coronavirus lockdown restrictions. The Government advised people to stay at home between mid-March and mid-May, the peak period for locating new nests and pairs.

Since the first nests were found in 2005, and the first successful breeding in 2006, significant results include:

1. 298 nests (210 successful) found and monitored
2. At least 381 fledged young from these nests
3. 205 fledged young tagged in the nest
4. Around 30 tags read on individual nesting adults, some seen over several years.
5. 1 more tag read in 2020, and two more read for the first time in many years.
6. Equal oldest tagged Shropshire Kite found in 2020, aged 11 years.

7. 29 nests were found in 2020, less than hoped for, because of the restrictions.
8. In spite of the lower number of nests found, the number of fledged young (48) was considerably higher than the previous highest (36 in 2011).

Monitoring 2020

Twenty-three nests were found and monitored by members of the Group, and another six were reported by local residents, making 29 found nests in all. Another four pairs were located, and another individual was seen carrying nest-building material, but the nests of none of these five pairs were found. This compares with 37 nests found or reported in 2019, which was 12 more than in 2018 and nine more than the previous highest total (28 in 2017). Given the continued rapid growth in the population, and the big increase in the number of nests found in 2019, we had high hopes of finding 50 in 2020, before our ambition was thwarted by the restrictions.

Of the 29 nests, seven were at new sites, 12 were in the same nest as last year, and eight were at the same site, but had moved up to 200m. Two were at sites last used several years ago.

The nests found were concentrated in the south-west hills (22 out of 29 were in SO27, 28, 37, 38, 39, 47, 48 and 49), but fieldwork by the Raptor Group was concentrated in these areas. More reports of Kites in the north of the County, and the south-east, would be gratefully received.

Some of these nests are very close together, but one of the two that were only around 400 metres apart, both occupied for six years up until 2019, was no longer occupied in 2020. One of the new nests is only 600m from one occupied since 2017. Several other pairs have neighbours within three kilometres.

The pair reported as nesting near Llanyblodwel (SJ22G) in 2018 was reported again in 2019, and Kites were seen at that location again in 2020, but permission to access the wood has not been obtainable, so nesting still has not been confirmed and any outcomes are unknown. This site is not included in the totals above. The landowners reported that Kites had been present in the wood for 2-3 years prior to 2018. This is the only definite report from the Oswestry uplands.

However, the number of Kites in this area has increased considerably in recent years. The Tanat to Perry Community Wildlife Group surveys 43 tetrads south and south-west of Oswestry. In spite of the more limited coverage in 2020, due to coronavirus restrictions, 12 Red Kites were seen in seven tetrads. In 2019, nine were seen in eight tetrads, and in 2018 11 were seen in 10 tetrads. Prior to 2018, Kites were much more scarce, and several members who saw Kites in 2018 said it was the first time they have seen them in the area, so these numbers reflect the spread of this species. The number of casual records increased considerably: 18 reports of 26 Kites in 16 tetrads in 2020.

Only four of 29 (13%) nests failed, a considerable improvement on the 36% failure rate in 2019. The outcome of one is not known.

Assuming that all chicks large enough to tag survived, at least 48 young fledged from them, considerably higher than the previous highest, 2011, when 36 fledged.

For the first time since 2006, no young Kites were wing-tagged in the nest.

About 130 different sites have been used since 2005. As well as the 34 sites occupied in 2020, another 44 sites used in previous years were checked, but no Kites were found there. This includes 12 sites that had a nest in 2019. Two sites with a nest in 2019 were not revisited.

Two unsuccessful nests were found in 2005, and between then and 2014, 59% of the total nest sites used in that 10 year period were used for one year only. Thirteen sites used between 2015 and 2017 were also used for one year only.

Figures for 2017-20 include a nest literally on the County border, near Bromfield. The border is a stream, and the wood was on the Herefordshire side, but the nest over-hung the Shropshire side of the stream.

Expansion of Range

The first nest site found north of Shrewsbury (SJ41T), in 2017, has not been reoccupied since, but the other 2017 nest site in the northern half of the County (the SJ ordnance survey grid squares), 10km south-west of Shrewsbury, has been occupied each year since, and produced three fledged young. Also in 2020, another pair nested only 600m distant, and raised another three young.

Another site north of Shrewsbury, in SJ41Z near Bomere Heath, was reported in 2019; the nest was found, and one young fledged. This site was apparently occupied in 2017, unknown to the Raptor Group, and three young fledged, but the pair there in 2018 apparently failed and left early. This site was occupied again in 2020, and three young fledged.

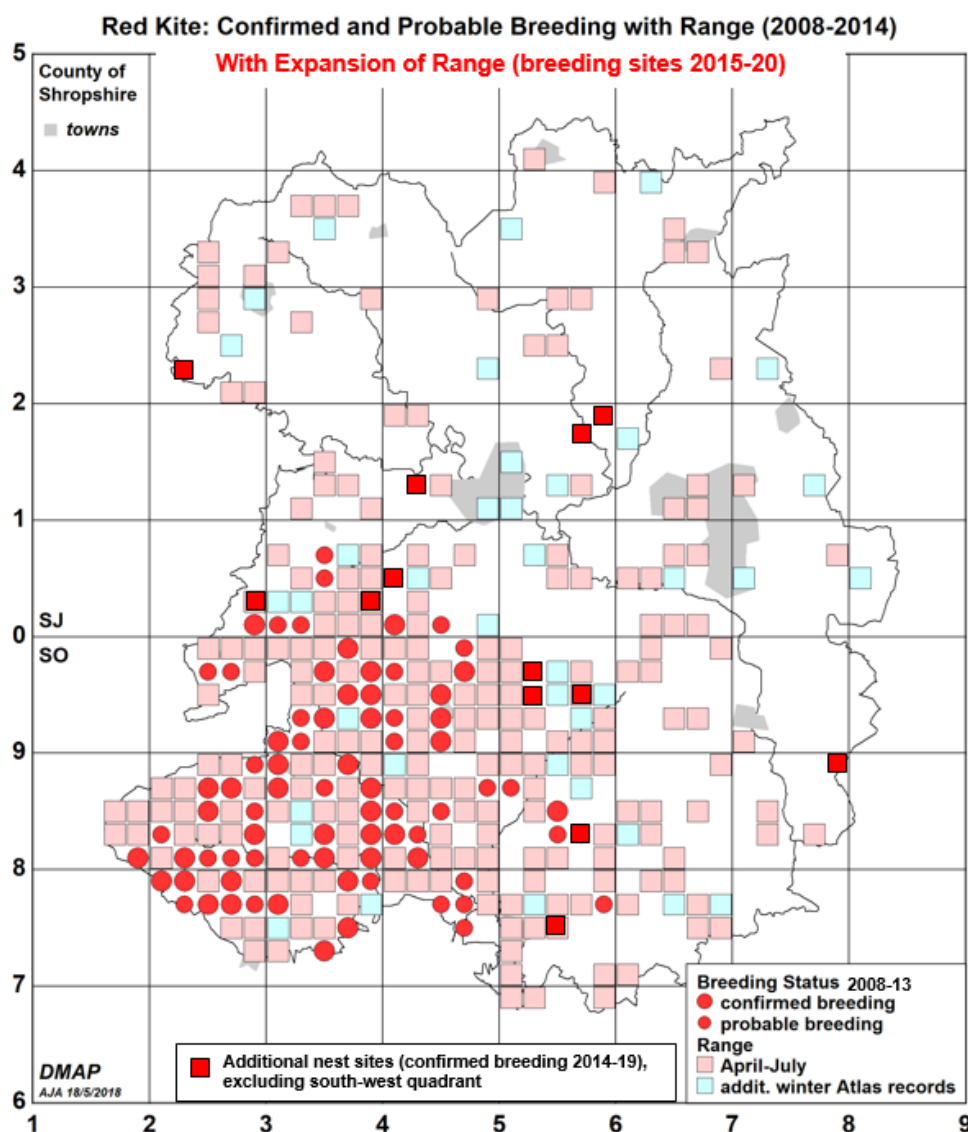
The site near Llanyblodwel (SJ22G), reported in 2018 and referred to above, is the furthest north so far, and it was apparently occupied again, but this remains unconfirmed.

Many reports were received of individual birds in the north, including several in the vicinity of Shrewsbury and Telford, so breeding is expected there in the near future, if it hasn't occurred already.

The expansion eastwards has continued as well, with a nest reported in 2019 from near Bridgnorth in SO78Z. A pair was reported at a different site near Bridgnorth in 2020, but no nest was found. A nest was found on the lower western slopes of Brown Clee, and two young fledged.

The successful nest found in 2019 east of Church Stretton, near Longville (SO59I), successfully fledged two young in 2020.

As the population increases and spreads, nests become harder to find, so the breeding population is now undoubtedly well over the 42 pairs located in 2019, and the same number in 2015.



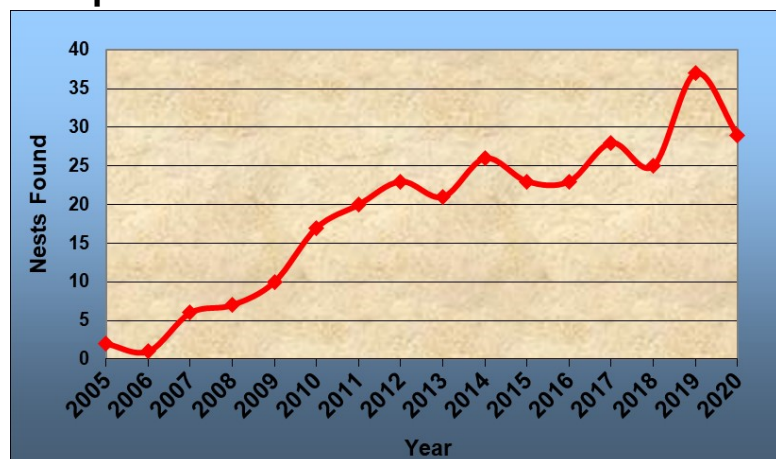
The Birds of Shropshire, published by Liverpool University Press in December 2019, includes a Red Kite distribution map based on fieldwork carried out between 2008 and 2013. Each symbol represents one of the 870 tetrads (2x2 kilometre squares on the Ordnance Survey national grid) in the County. Tetrads with Confirmed and Probable breeding are represented by red dots (larger size = confirmed breeding), pink squares are tetrads where kite was seen in the breeding season, and pale blue squares are where it was seen in winter but not the breeding season.

The tetrads containing the 13 nests found since 2013 listed above (which excludes additional nests found in the main

range, the south-west quadrant) have been added to the map, marked with red squares.

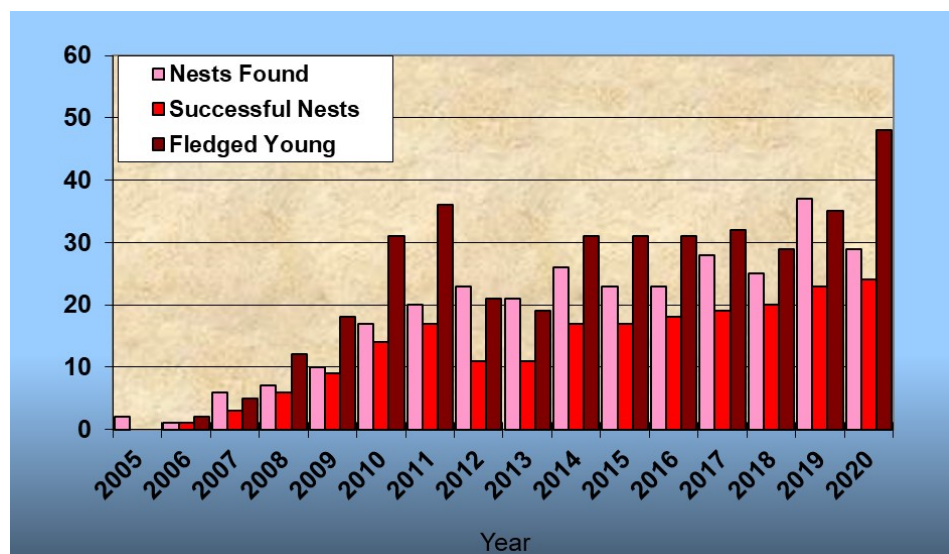
Bird surveys carried out by Community Wildlife Groups, covering the Severn –Vyrnwy Confluence, Tanat to Perry (Oswestry south), the Three Parishes (Weston Rhyn, St. Martin's and Gobowen - Oswestry north) and (Titterstone) Clee Hill, include Red Kite amongst the target species recorded. The number of tetrads where Kites were recorded in 2019, and the total number of tetrads surveyed by each group, were 8/25, 8/39, 1/25 and 8/16 respectively. This shows that Kites were seen in more tetrads outside the main range in 2019 than in the whole of the six years 2008-13, also confirming the continuing expansion of range. These figures have not been updated for 2020, because curtailment of the surveys does not allow production of comparable figures. However, the large number of casual records reported to Tanat to Perry CWG in 2020, noted above, confirms the continuing trend.

Comparison with Previous Years



The number of nests found has grown rapidly, as shown in the chart. The number found in 2019 was the highest in one year since Kites returned to breed here in 2005, after an absence of 130 years. The lower number in 2020 reflects the reduction in fieldwork effort, due to coronavirus restrictions. In total, 298 nests have been found, and 210 (70.5%) have been successful.

There were more fledged young (36) in 2011, from only 20 found nests, but at least 35 fledged in 2019, the second highest total. The total in 2020, 48 from 29 nests, is far and away the highest so far.



Since the first successful breeding in 2006, at least 381 young are known to have flown from Shropshire nests, and 205 have been tagged. The number of nests found, successful nests and fledged young in each year is shown in the chart, and summarised in the table.

Nests and Outcome	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Nests Found	2	1	6	7	10	17	20	23	21	26	23	23	28	25	37	29	298
Successful Nests	0	1	3	6	9	14	17	11	11	17	17	18	19	20	23	24	210
% of Successful Nests		100	50.0	85.7	90.0	82.4	85.0	47.8	52.4	65.4	73.9	78.3	67.9	80.0	62.2	82.8	70.5
Fledged Young		2	5	12	18	31	36	21	19	31	31	31	32	29	35	48	381
Productivity / Nest		2.00	0.83	1.71	1.80	1.82	1.80	0.91	0.90	1.19	1.35	1.35	1.14	1.16	0.95	1.66	1.28
Productivity / Successful Nest		2.00	1.67	2.00	2.00	2.21	2.12	1.91	1.73	1.82	1.82	1.72	1.68	1.45	1.52	2.00	1.81

Productivity

Since the first successful nest, average productivity has been 1.28 fledged young per nest found and 1.81 per successful nest. Productivity varies from year to year, affected mainly by weather conditions. In 2020, the proportion of successful nests (70.5%), and the productivity per nest and per successful nest, were all substantially higher than 2019, which was badly affected by severe weather, including

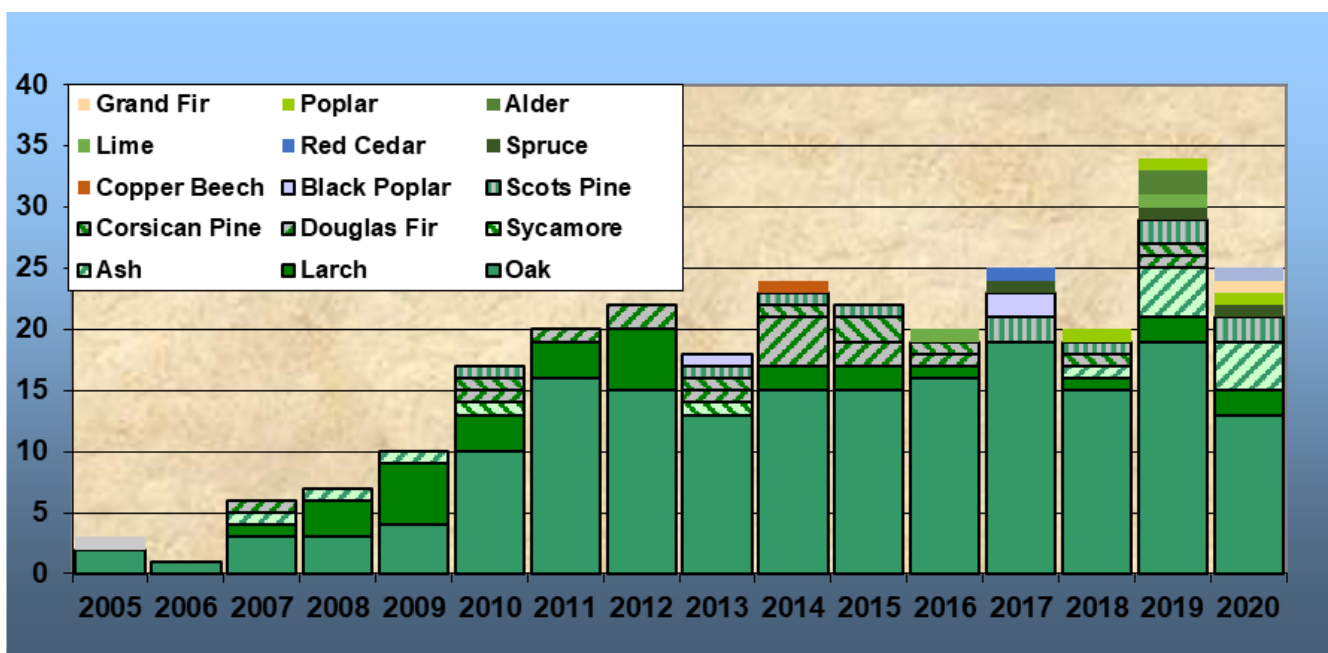
one of the wettest June's on record. April and May 2020 were largely sunny and dry, and all three indicators of productivity were the highest since 2011, and considerably better than the annual average figure since 2006.

Figures are shown in the table above.

As usual, productivity in Shropshire nests was considerably higher than in the adjacent monitoring area in East Powys, where the comparable figures were an average of 0.88 fledged young per nest found and 1.33 per successful nest since 2003, and 0.9 and 1.1 respectively in 2020. Better productivity in Shropshire is attributed to better weather (generally warmer and drier), and better food supply, particularly the massive amount of Pheasant carrion available year-round from the three-quarters of a million released in the County each year for shooting.

Nest Tree Species

The species of tree holding the nest has been recorded for 276 of the 298 nests found. Two-thirds (65%) have been in oak trees, and 11% in larches. Thirteen other species have been used, but only three species have reached double figures: Douglas Fir (14 - 5%), Ash (12 - 4%) and Scots Pine (11 - 4%), and none have exceeded 5% of the nests found.



White Kite

The white Kite seen several times near Bridges, during 2017 and in the early spring in 2018, has not been seen subsequently. No other white Kites were reported either.

White Kites are leucistic, lacking the brown pigment in the feathers. They are not true albinos, as they do have pigment in the cere and legs (yellow as normal), and in the iris in the eye.

This is believed to be a result of the genetic bottleneck in the Welsh population, when there were only two breeding females in the 1930s, and it affects about 1 in 150 Kites. Few have attempted to breed, but all those known have been males, so they may all be males. None are known to have bred successfully.

Poisoning

In 2014, an adult was found dead on the ground directly under one nest. There were no visible signs of injury or persecution, but the landowner had used rat poison in a nearby barn. Two well grown chicks were later found dead in the nest, presumably from the same cause. Rat poison is a common cause of death, and it is found in potentially lethal amounts in most dead Kites sent for post-mortem. The corpse of this adult was sent for post-mortem analysis immediately after it was found, but preliminary results were not received until 24 January 2017. Extensive haemorrhaging was found, similar to that "found in

birds in which high levels of anticoagulant rodenticides have been detected”, and samples were sent to the Predatory Birds Monitoring Scheme for further analysis. No further results have been received.

Wing Tags

There were 9 tagged birds at Shropshire nest sites in 2014, but the number has declined since, with 8 in 2015, and 5 in 2016 and 2017. In 2018, there were six, including four of those present 2017, and there were five in 2019, including three with tags read in 2018. In 2020 there were six, of which three were at the same site as last year, two were seen for the first time in many years, and one was found for the first time since it left the nest.



Pride of place goes to Cerise (Pink) 30, photographed by Simon Marlow near Clunbury. The male Kite fledged from a nest near Craven Arms in 2009, nested as a one-year-old (the only example of such precociousness in Shropshire) in 2010, only a few metres from where he was found again in 2020, but moved to a different site near Purslow in 2011, the last time he was seen. The first photo revealed the area to be searched for the nest, and the second was taken from near the nest site.



At 11 years old, he is the equal oldest Shropshire Kite (the national longevity record is more than 26)

The only other 11-year-old, female black L1 was found nesting near Bridges in 2019, 2.0km from her natal site. The largest of a brood of three tagged in July 2008, she was found at a nest site

in 2010 and 2011 (also 2km from her natal site), then at a second nest site in 2013, 2015 and 2019, but not in the years in between. The distance between her two known nest sites is only 0.8km. She was not found in 2020, and was not present at the site of the 2019 nest.

The previous oldest was provisionally identified as a male, Cerise 46, near Mainstone in 2018, one of a brood of two raised near Bridges, 13km distant, in 2009. It was 9 years old in 2018. The male at the same site in 2019 was also tagged, but it couldn't be read. It may well have been the same bird. The site was unoccupied in 2020.



The tagged birds found at nest sites in 2020 were:-

- White / black A, a nine-year-old female fledged on the western slopes of the Long Mynd in 2011, was present at her nest site near Bishop's Castle for the sixth consecutive year.
- White / black O fledged from the same nest as Cerise 30 two years later, and was found at a nest near Edgton in 2013 and 2014, but was not seen again until 2020, on the other side of Edgton. Kites have been present at this site for the three years that the current owners have lived there (Janet Cobb, pers.comm), so it is likely that this tagged kite has been at this site for several years.

- Yellow/black 01, a six year old female, nested just west of Clun for the fourth year running; she had nested at a different site in 2016.
- Yellow / black 07 nested near Lydham in 2017, and was found at a winter roost site near Norbury in the winter of 2017-18. A tagged bird was at a nest near the roost site in 2018, but the tag could not be read. However, this same female was at this site in 2019, and again in 2020.
- Green / black 29, a female fledged from the same nest on the western slopes of the Long Mynd, but in 2015, was found for the first time breeding about 6km due north.



- Black / yellow E5, from the same nest yet again in 2017, was seen regularly at a farmyard near Marton in 2019, but the nest could not be found. She was seen again at the same farm in 2020, but was not one of the pair where the nest was found in 2020.

All of these individuals had been tagged in the nest at nearby sites, all less than 10km from the breeding site.

Three white-tagged birds seen in 2019, Q, U and 88, were not found in 2020.

A nine-year-old female, tagged at a Shropshire natal site near Knighton in 2010, was found for the fourth year running at a nest in Wales, west of Knighton and just over 6km south

of her natal site in 2019, and she too may have been at this site in previous years. However, she had lost her right wing-tag by 2019, and the left wing of the sitting female could not be seen in 2020. The nest failed, so the female was not seen again. It is therefore not known whether this Kite was present in 2020 or not.

One new tag was read at a Shropshire nest site in 2020, green/black 29 a female, so a total of 30 different tags have been read at nest sites, 13 males, 13 females and four sex unknown. Males have moved an average of 17 km from their natal site, and females 17km. However, three of these (two males and a female) were long-distance colonisers from Wales in 2007 and 2008. If these three are excluded, the averages are 8km for males and 10km for females. If subsequent colonisers from Wales and the female returning to Wales are also excluded (i.e. only birds that moved within Shropshire are included) the averages are 7km for males but still 10km for females. These figures illustrate again how sedentary Kites are, but there is a tendency for females to move further.

The average age of first breeding is 2.7 years (excluding the three that were first found at 5 years or older, which had probably been at different nest sites previously), and average age of last observed breeding is over 5 years (including 5 still alive). Two have reached 11, two have reached 9, two have reached 8 and one has reached 5 years old. In addition, Blue E5 has reached 10 years old.

The previous oldest (before the observations of three of those above, and black L1 in 2019 and cerise 46 in 2018) was killed by a car, early in 2015, 8 years 7months 7days after ringing.

Photographers who take digital pictures of Kites are requested to blow them up and check for wing-tags. If the photo is sharp, the tag can often be read, as in the following cases, and such photos provide very useful information.

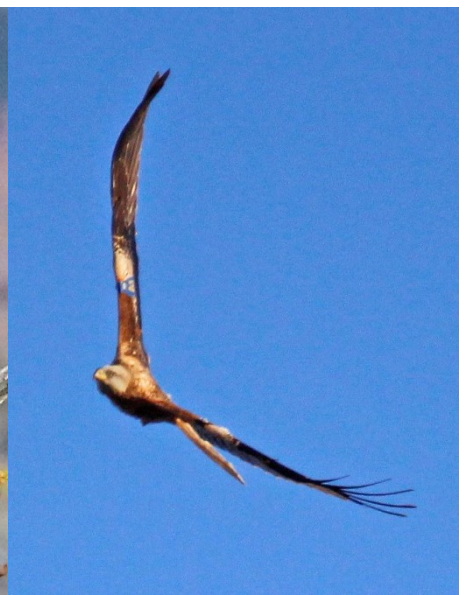


The two photos above, taken in August 2020, are of the same bird, Blue/black E5, showing that it has lost the blue tag off the right wing. The photos were taken near the Stiperstones car park, only 3km from the natal site in 2010. The same bird was photographed near the same place in 2016. It must have been nesting nearby for many years, but the nest site has not yet been found.



Purple / black K was photographed in July 2020 above the Church Stretton Allotments, about 8km from its 2016 natal site. Again, it must have been nesting nearby for some years, but the nest site has not yet been found.

Both of the last two Kites to be tagged in the nest, south-west of Shrewsbury in 2019, were photographed in 2020. Blue/yellow A0 was at Exfords Green in November, while A1 was near Hanwood in March.



No tags were read at winter roost sites (see below).

Reporting Tagged Kites

Reports of tagged Kites should be sent to Leo Smith (contact details below), or reported online to the Welsh Kite Trust website, www.welshkitetrust.wales

Winter Roost Sites

Kites often form roosts in the mid-winter months. The first roost was found near Kempton early in 2009, with up to 14 kites present, but only one tagged individual was seen at the roost on all six visits. Assuming that the turnover of tagged and untagged kites was the same, around 20 different individuals used the roost. A larger roost was found at the same site in 2010, and the tagged birds indicated that the majority were one-year-olds from Wales. The furthest travelled came over 100km, and four more came more than 50km. The roost was visited 43 times, no individual was present for as many as half the occasions, and seven out of 17 tagged individuals were only seen once. A second roost, near Wentnor, was also found in 2010. Tags suggested that most there were one-year-olds from Shropshire nests. Again, knowing that individuals did not join the roost every night, and assuming that the turnover of tagged kites was the same as untagged kites, around 60 different individuals were present at the two roosts in 2010. Only three were seen at both roosts.

Subsequent attempts have been made to find winter roosts. One of up to 32 individuals was found in 2012, but the birds disappeared quickly into the wood, and no tags could be read. No regular roost site was found in the following three years, but three winter roosts were found and monitored in 2016 (near Aston-on-Clun, maximum of 39 on 22 January; near Norbury, maximum 17 Kites on 23 January; and near Wentnor, maximum seven on 27 January).

In 2017-18, four roosts were found, near Onibury (max. 6 on 19 January), near Lydham (max. 29 on 27 December 2017), near Kempton (max 9 on 13 February 2018) and near Aston-on-Clun (29 on 2 and 29 January).

In the winter of 2018-19, five roosts were found, near Plowden, Clungunford, Norbury, Aston-on-Clun and Lydbury North. A monthly visit was made to each roost, a total of 29 visits altogether. The maximum count at each site was 29 on 20 January, 6 on 4 February, 7 on 17 January, 19 on 28 February and 9 on 26 January, respectively. No tagged Kites were seen, but the roosts were usually at the top of a hill, and the light was often poor, so it was often impossible to reach a position to look for tags.

In 2019-20, five roosts were found, near Norbury, Onibury, Plowden, Aston-on-Clun and Corvedale, three of which are similar locations to last year. Visits were made monthly, and the maximum count at each site was 10 on 9 December, 8 on three separate dates, 24 on 21 December, 17 on 7 February and 9 on two separate dates, respectively. No tagged Kites were seen.

The total of these maximum counts is 66, similar to the total of 70 in 2017-18 and 2018-19. As there has been little evidence in the past of tagged Kites visiting more than one roost, and the maximum count has been about half the total number visiting each roost, it is likely that the total number of Kites involved was well over 100 in each winter. As it appears that breeding pairs roost close to their nest sites, and monitoring of tagged birds at the early roosts referred to above found that a high proportion of them were in their first year, these are all likely to be Kites in their first or second year.

All these roosts were in the south-west, but, given the expansion of range of the breeding population, it is likely that there are roosts now in other parts of the County too.

The monitoring of winter roost sites confirms that the County population remains healthy, but the population in the south west may have stabilised.

The future of Kite Tagging

It has become impossible to tag a high proportion of the population, and the number found at breeding sites has been declining steadily since 2010. It was decided to continue tagging chicks in the nest in 2017, in the hope of reaching 200 tagged young from Shropshire nests. This target was just missed, so a further seven were tagged in 2018. Two more in 2019 brought the total to 205. None were tagged in 2020.

To ensure that as much as possible is learnt from the tagging, finding nest sites in the hope of locating tagged adults will continue. By 2021 almost all of the surviving tagged Kites should have joined the breeding population.

If anyone knows the location of a 2020 Kite nest, or finds one in 2021 or subsequently, please don't assume we know about it. The photos of tagged kites above show that there are many that we are not aware of. Please tell Leo Smith 01694 720296, leo@leosmith.org.uk

Further Information

A similar monitoring report for the adjacent area of East Powys (Radnorshire), and other information, can be found on the Welsh Kite Trust's new website www.welshkitetrust.wales

Leo Smith
March 2021

Thanks to Vince Downs, Michelle Frater, Chris Parr and Dave Pearce for helping to find and monitor the nests, and to Dave Pearce for monitoring the roost sites.

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