

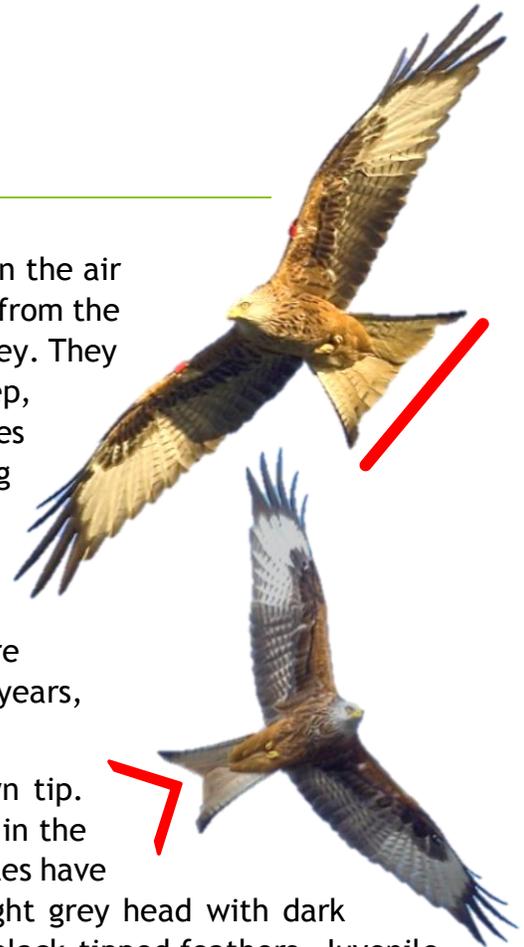
Red Kite - Funky Facts

Public Survey 2014, TWIC

Red Kites (*Milvus milvus*) are very agile birds, and they can stay in the air for hours at a time. Red Kites possess excellent eyesight and hunt from the air by circling over open ground or fields, keeping an eye out for prey. They often glide for long distances close to the ground followed by deep, lethargic wing beats. When soaring, the Red Kite constantly changes the angle of its distinctive forked tail to steer, whilst hardly moving its wings. However, the 'fork' is not always obvious, depending on the aerodynamic maneuvers of the kite (see images, right).

The wingspan of Red Kites can reach up to 170 cm. Considering this large wingspan, the kites are very light birds, weighing no more than 0.9-1.3 kg! The lifespan of Red Kites is usually around 4-5 years, but they can grow as old as 26 years of age!

Red Kites have bright yellow legs and a yellow bill with a brown tip. Males and females look very similar and can be hard to tell apart in the field, although the females are generally larger than the males. Kites have a red/brown body with dark streaks, a red/orange tail and a light grey head with dark streaks. The wings have distinct white patches underneath, with black-tipped feathers. Juvenile kites have a more 'faded' colour compared with adult birds.



Red Kites are top predators and have a varied diet, eating both live and dead prey. The Red Kite's bill is not strong enough to penetrate tough skin, so they are unable to take any large prey. When catching live prey, the kites will dive from the air (or drop from a post) feet first to catch their prey (see image, left). The UK diet mainly consists of small mammals, such as field voles, mice and young rabbits, birds, carrion, fish, earthworms and some amphibians.

The Red Kite is resident in the UK but they are scarce in the Lothians and Scottish Borders - TWIC holds 55 records of kite sightings dating back to the year 2000.

Red Kites are now specially protected. Red Kites were once common, but persecution drove them almost to extinction in Britain. Following reintroductions of Red Kites from Europe in the 1980s, the numbers have slowly been increasing. However, Red Kites disperse very slowly, and it will take time to establish any real increase in Red Kite numbers. The continued persecution and poisoning of Red Kites proves the biggest challenge to the conservation of these birds.

References: *RSPB handbook of BRITISH Birds*. 3rd ed. Peter Holden and Tim Cleeves 2012 (re-print). HELM Bloomsbury Publishing PLC London.

Edinburgh Hawkwatch, www.edinburghhawkwatch.org.uk

All photos: Dean Bricknell Photography, www.deanbricknellphotography.com

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