



## **Feeding Red Kites Causes Concern**

**Cathy Rose, Chilterns Conservation Board**

Red kites are now a familiar and much-loved sight over the Chilterns. Since their re-introduction to the area in the early 1990s, their numbers have risen dramatically, and the local population is now estimated to be well over 1,000 breeding pairs.

They are birds of prey that primarily scavenge on the carcasses of dead animals, sometimes taking small live prey such as rodents and chicks when the opportunity arises. They also capitalise on food left out for them by local people, often clustering around gardens in towns and villages waiting for hand-outs. When fed regularly, red kites become bold and fearless of humans, sometimes taking food from people's hands, and in rare cases, causing injury in the process. While the spectacle of a close encounter with a red kite may be thrilling to those people who feed them, for others who don't feed this bold behaviour can be highly alarming.

Increasingly, red kites in the Chilterns are being branded a menace for disrupting school lunchtimes and other al fresco dining. Some people are worried that the birds have come too close to their pets. Others are complaining that their cars and washing have been soiled by kite droppings; raw meat scraps have been dropped in their gardens and rat numbers have increased. There have also been claims that aircraft could be at risk of hitting red kites near airfields at Benson and Booker.

There are conservation and health concerns too. The re-introduction of red kites to the Chilterns has been an incredible success, with the population increasing year-on-year, but it is important that the growing numbers of kites

can be sustained by the natural food sources available to them in the wider countryside. There is no shortage of naturally available food in the Chilterns to sustain a healthy population of red kites, so supplementary feeding is not necessary. By feeding red kites in their gardens, people may be discouraging the birds from spreading out and finding their food naturally, which could ultimately lead to an unsustainably high population of red kites, becoming reliant on human hand-outs.

Also, the food being offered to the kites is often cooked, which offers little nutritional benefit to the birds, and may contain salt and other additives, which could pose a threat to the birds' health.

Conservation organisations are being asked to do something about this 'nuisance' behaviour. The truth is, there is nothing we can do if people continue to feed the birds. They are wild animals that should be left to find their food naturally in the wider countryside, thus maintaining a sustainable balance with their ecosystem. People who feed these birds are encouraging them to breed at higher densities than they would otherwise do if supplementary food were not offered, leading to an unsustainably large population of kites in areas where they are being fed, and a public perception that there are 'too many' of them.

While it's not illegal to feed kites and we appreciate that people get great enjoyment from seeing the birds close-up, we hope that those who currently feed the kites will take heed of the social concerns and the issues of over-population, and gradually reduce their feeding over time, eventually stopping altogether. This will allow the birds time to adjust to finding their food more sustainably, spreading out from their core areas in the process.

So, to feed or not to feed? If you really care about the long-term conservation of red kites in the Chilterns, the answer from the Chilterns Conservation Board is, "No thank you".