

## research ideas, policy discussion

# Should we feed animal by products to a reintroduced UK scavenger: the red kite (*Milvus milvus*)?

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### Background:

Red kites are scavengers most of the year, and may hunt prey during the breeding season.

In the UK, the red kite reintroduction programme has been acclaimed as one of the most successful reintroduction stories in conservation.

Since 1989, the programme brought the population from the brink of extinction with around 70 birds in 2000/2001 to over 2715 breeding pairs in 2013.

The evolution of the red kite in the UK has been very closely associated with human activities.

Most sources of food for the red kites are human-dependent, and red kites have depended on human activities for centuries. The main mortality causes affecting red kites are also related to human activities.



### Who feeds red kites in the UK?

**1) Citizens.** In the greater Reading area, around 4.5% of households feed red kites, sustaining around 142-320 kites, which represents a significant proportion of the kites visiting the area on a daily basis.

**2) Farmers, officially.** Farmers can be registered as 'Approved Animal by product plants' and use animal by products to feed red kites. They can then sell tickets to visitors for access to the feeding stations during feeding times. **Evidence has not yet been published** regarding the number of red kites that this type of feeding might sustain.

**3) Farmers, unofficially.** Reasons to be confirmed. Love of nature/ curiosity towards red kites/no need to pay plants to get rid of animal by products?

### No, red kites should not be fed by humans...

- 'overpopulation': population risks outgrowing naturally sustainable levels
- Carter (2007) highlights issues encountered when individual citizens feed red kites:
  1. Low nutritional value of cooked food
  2. Harmful effect of additives
  3. Absence of tendons and ligaments that play a role in growth
  4. People may feed kites only in a specific season, leaving the kites without food the rest of the year
- Evidence suggests that ground nesting seabirds, waders and gamebirds can be limited by predation during breeding time and feeding red kites would increase their population to the detriment of other birds being preyed on (Roos et al 2018)
- Lack of food is not the main factor hampering the population growth of red kites in the UK (Meyer et al 2016) and crime is still a major threat to red kite populations (Millins et al 2014)
- Feeding stations may prevent the movement and spread of the red kite populations

### Yes, red kites should be fed by humans...

- Diversionary feeding decreases attacks on water birds during the reproduction season (but may increase the population of red kites and therefore increase the risk of attacks? (Mason et al 2021)
- Red kites don't tend to move much on a daily basis after they have left the nest (van der Wal et al 2015), hence feeding stations may have encouraged the exploration and spread of red kite populations if the stations are away from the nests

### Research ideas:

- to survey farmers who officially feed kites in feeding stations to estimate the proportion of the red kite population that is sustained via feeding stations
- to survey farmers in areas where red kites are found to estimate the proportion of farmers who unofficially feed red kites and complete the estimate of red kites that depend on agriculture as a source of feeding
- to map the red kites nest-friendly areas in the UK to see the correlation with feeding stations and potentially advise on optimal locations for future feeding stations

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