



Newsletter, Winter 2023



Autumn and early winter roosting red kites – Ken Sanderson

Red kites are communal roosters. It is very unusual for birds of prey to roost together in such high numbers. These roosts form in autumn and numbers will increase into winter, peaking in January and then they start to break up in February as birds move back onto their territories to breed.

So why do red kites do it? There are several possible reasons:

Red Kites are sociable birds and enjoy the company of other kites outside the breeding season. A lot of calling, wheeling and chasing can be observed at the pre-roost.

To find a partner – juveniles are “introduced” to the roost by their parents in early autumn and failed breeders, who might be looking for a new mate, have also been noted.

To find food – kites that leave the roost very early in the morning are often followed by other kites which might be thinking that they are returning to a food source visited the previous day.

Over the last few years the kites have been using two areas as their main winter roosting sites, Gibside is one, and the other is higher up the Derwent Valley, in the woods around Hamsterley Mill and beyond into the Pontburn Valley.



Photograph by Paul Danielson

The latter has recorded the largest number of birds in the past few years and has been the first roost to come together. This year was no exception.

In early October seven kites roosted near Southfield Farm in the Pontburn Valley. But earlier that afternoon 20 birds had been noted at a pre-roost gathering over the Hamsterley Mill estate. So, some of the kites were roosting elsewhere. This was confirmed the following week when 49 kites were recorded dropping into final roost behind Lintzford Garden Centre whilst only 10 kites were noted at the Pontburn Valley site, near Southfield Farm. So, there is a split roost higher up the valley at the moment with kites using two sites, one behind Lintzford Garden Centre and one higher up in the Pontburn Valley.

On a wet afternoon on the 20th November only 13 kites were seen at the pre-roost gathering on the Hamsterley Mill Estate. Shortly after, from a viewpoint near Hamsterley Hall, 17 kites were counted moving up the valley to a location near Southfield Farm. But at 4.17pm, 20 minutes after sunset, 22 kites took to the air and all drifted down the Valley to roost at Lintzford Garden Centre. This could be an indication that the kites are settling down and are moving towards a single roost site in that area.

The first indication that a roost had formed at Gibside was on the 23rd October when 6 kites dropped into the Estate just before dark.

The Friends of Red Kites Monitoring Teams and volunteers are set to take part in the Annual National Red Kite Winter Roost Survey on Sunday 14th January 2024. This should give us an accurate count of the number of roosting kites there are in our area. In poor weather, earlier this year 85 kites were counted, and for the 2022 survey 94 kites were recorded.

Your Secretary is back – Harold Dobson

I'd like to say a big "THANK YOU" to all members and colleagues for their kindness and support during my recent illness and extended stay in hospital. I was discharged in November and am making slow, but steady, progress. I've already started to resume some of my Secretary's duties.

Our 20th Anniversary Events – Sylvia Jones



We are 20

To celebrate the 20th Anniversary since the first red kites were reintroduced in the Valley, we plan a 6 month program covering a range of events:

- June 26th: Our AGM with possible presentation and photographic display
- July 7th: Red Kite Family Fun Day at Gibside (National Trust)
- August: An outdoor children's event at Thornley Woodlands Centre
- Sept: An extended walk to include sightings of red kites if possible. Steve Lockwood has also kindly offered to lead a red kite trail walk. The 11 miles can be split into sections if necessary.
- October: A possible joint event with Gibside.
- November: Members' Night meal
- December: A public roost watch

We would warmly welcome any suggestions for further events. Your support at these events would be appreciated.

Members' Night at the Skiff Inn – Sylvia Jones

On Monday 13th November, 22 FORK members met at the Skiff Inn, Swalwell, for a pre-ordered meal. We were offered a choice of 5 main courses and 4 desserts. When the meals were served the portions were huge. The staff were very attentive.

I introduced the evening and gave an update of next year's proposed events. Ken gave a red kite update. He presented 2 sets of photo quiz because we were sitting close together. The donated raffle prizes raised £53 for our funds. Everyone enjoyed the evening and their meals.



Thank you to everyone who attended and a special thank you to the staff at the Skiff.

A Festive Poem – Jim Third

First, many thanks to members of the Red Kite Group for their kind thoughts, wishes and help with my current health issues.

I'm a little pine tree ... as you can see.
All the other pine trees are much bigger than me.
Maybe when I grow up.
I'll be a great big, Merry Christmas tree.



As this is our final Newsletter of 2023, we would like to wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a happy & peaceful New Year.

www.friendsofredkites.org.uk