



# Friends of Red Kites

in the North East of England

[www.friendsofredkites.org.uk](http://www.friendsofredkites.org.uk)



## Newsletter, Winter 2025

### **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 the autumn, and numbers will increase into winter, peaking in January, and then, in early February, they will start to disperse back onto their breeding territories.

The kites are a little unpredictable when it comes to roosting behaviour. Last year, in Autumn, there were the usual high numbers of birds at the pre-roost gathering on the Hamsterley Mill estate but, from there, they were dispersing in all directions to their final roost locations, as if not knowing where they wanted to settle. The two traditional roosting sites in that area did not form until December with 55 kites counted there and an additional 21 roosting at Gibside, lower down in the valley.



*Photo by Paul Danielson*

This autumn the birds settled into their usual roosting routine at the beginning of November and the total numbers for the 3 roost sites was 88 (up from 76 last year), which is very encouraging. The high number of red kites at the pre-roost gathering on the Hamsterley Mill Estate (up to 53 have been seen in the air together recently) is almost certainly due to the fact that the birds are being fed at dusk by residents. Friends of Red Kites do not condone the feeding of these wild birds but advise that, if people do, they feed them raw meat preferably with fur or feather on it.

It would appear that the roost site on the Gibside Estate is declining year on year as the core area for breeding shifts to higher up the Derwent Valley. At this time last year 21 kites roosted in the Gibside area; this year only 10 have been observed up to present.

The Friends of Red Kites Monitoring Teams and volunteers are once again going to be involved in the Annual National Red Kite Winter Roost Survey which takes place on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2026. This should give us an accurate count of the number of roosting kites there are in our area. Last year's survey produced a total of 69 kites so, with the numbers noted at roost already this winter, there is a high expectation that this number will easily be bettered.

### **Did you know i) The red kite has an eye for white?**

Old folklore, and Rossini's opera "The Thieving Magpie", suggests that magpies are drawn to shiny objects. Recent research, from the University of Exeter, indicates that these birds actually tend to avoid such items!!

However, the red kite's attraction to white objects has been well-documented since the Middle Ages, when these birds were a familiar sight in both rural and urban Britain. At that time, people did their washing in rivers and often left it to dry on riverbanks, making it easy for red kites to swoop down and collect white linen for their nests. Shakespeare himself references this behaviour in 'A Winter's Tale' (Act 4, Scene 3): "*When the kite builds look to your lesser linen.*"

Our dedicated volunteer teams regularly visit red kite territories in the Derwent Valley, Northumberland and Durham. The work begins in early March with locating the nests, followed by continuous monitoring until the chicks are ringed and wing-tagged, prior to fledging, in early June. Experienced tree-climbers are employed to access the nests, at which point their contents are revealed, and gently lower the chicks down to the licenced ringers/taggers below.



Some of the white items discovered in red kite nests are: an England football flag, a woolly hat, white socks, PVC gloves, a plastic bag, a pillowcase, baler twine, a dishcloth, a disposable nappy and a soiled pair of men's underpants.

### **Did you know ii)**

...that Gibside (National Trust) has renamed the Strawberry Castle Play Area as the "**Red Kite Play area**"?

### **Red Kite Awards**

In the past, Liz Twist (MP for Blaydon & Consett) has given her annual awards to groups for services to the Community. [Our health walks won such an award in 2022]. Liz has now changed the title of her awards to "**Red Kite Awards**".

One of this year's award winners is Chopwell's Shed and here is a photo of them receiving their award from the MP. Jim Third, Chair of the Shed & loyal FoRK member, is holding the Certificate.



## **Health Walks with Friends of Red Kites – Jackey Lockwood**

The Health Walks programme has had another active year. There are five favourite walks which we have used. We have met up each Monday afternoon at 1.30 pm for a 3-mile walk in the Derwent Valley or in nearby Watergate Park. The paths we have used have been surfaced and at most had a gentle gradient (except for the steps from the Lockhaugh Meadow!). There were three nominated Leaders on each walk so the pace could be varied, if necessary, but so all Walkers improved their fitness and stamina as well as socialising. There was a café at the end of most of the walks for those who wanted refreshments.

The main walk lasts for approximately an hour and a half. In order that as many people as want to be out enjoying the fresh air and exercise there is now a “Tail-Enders” group. The pace has been slower, the distance shorter and with a few longer stops along the way which enabled more people to participate. The whole group meets up at the end of each walk. Wildlife seen was recorded each week; it varied depending on the season, weather and the habitat type which included woodland, open meadow or riverside. There was always something of interest to observe amongst plants, birds and animals.



The average number of Walkers out with us remained steady at 16 to 20 folk. We are very fortunate to have been able to enjoy some of the best outdoor spaces in Gateshead. The current programme of walks is on our website. The walks are free, and new Walkers are always welcome; you just need to register when you arrive. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the volunteer Health Walk Leaders who have contributed so much to the success and enjoyment of these walks, and to the Walkers themselves for their continued interest, enthusiasm and support. We look forward to getting out walking in the year ahead.



## **Red Kite reintroduction comes "full circle" – Harold Dobson**

Nearly four decades ago, red kites were nearly extinct in England and Scotland with just a few pairs left in Wales.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, red kite chicks from Spain were released in the Chilterns on the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire border. It proved so successful that the species is now thriving across the UK, with estimates of more than 6,000 mating pairs or about 15% of the world's population.

British-born red kite chicks have now been taken to south-west Spain as part of a four-year project to revive the population there from the brink of extinction. The region has fewer than 50 mating pairs due to predators like the eagle owl and human factors such as illegal poisoning and persecution.



In 2022, conservationists were granted special licences from Natural England to collect red kite chicks, mostly from Northamptonshire, and send them over to the Extremadura region of Spain.

More than 120 chicks have been collected with about 30 exported each year. So, the red kite story for the Spanish red kites has, indeed, come "*full circle*".



As this is our final Newsletter of 2025, we would like to wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a happy & peaceful New Year.



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