

“The Red Kites of the Chilterns”
Speaker on January 3rd 2018 - Carl Feltham

The first meeting of 2018 was held on 3rd January when Carl Feltham of the Reading branch of the RSPB gave us a most interesting and informative talk on red kites, their history dating back to the Middle Ages, when they were used as useful scavengers to clean up the detritus left by humans rather like the vultures of Africa and India today, through their gradual decline until by the end of the nineteenth century they had become virtually extinct in England and Scotland, except for 6 pairs, although some breeding pairs still survived in the mountains of mid-Wales. The reason for their decline was that they were perceived as vermin, along with herons, which killed too many fish, foxes and buzzards which killed too many pheasants. The result was that during Georgian and Victorian times farmers and gamekeepers were encouraged to shoot them. A penny was given for every head of a red kite that was presented to church wardens who logged their demise.

In the early 1990s a decision was taken by various conservation bodies, including the RSPB, to try to reintroduce red kites into this country, starting with the Chilterns National Park. The reason why the Chilterns were chosen is because of the suitability of the undulating countryside with the mixture of different woodlands, arable farming as well as crop farming, all of which provide the ideal foods for both red kites and buzzards, which have also made a remarkable comeback. The first attempts at reintroducing kites was by using chicks that had been hatched in Spain and reared here. Unfortunately these attempts failed because once the birds were large enough they flew back to Spain! Further attempts were made using red kites from Sweden and some from mid-Wales. In 1992 there were just 4 pairs but by 2005 their numbers had increased to 250 pairs. By 2016 these had increased to about 600 pairs. The result is that the Chilterns have the highest concentration of red kites than anywhere else in the world. Reading, unbelievably, also has more red kites than any other town or city, especially on a Sunday when they descend on the town from surrounding counties! The reason is that too many homesteads are feeding them with the leftovers from Sunday lunches. Unfortunately there are downsides to this habit because the female red kite is larger than the male and it needs roughage and bones to help build up calcium and other minerals to feed the chick embryos. If the shells are insufficiently strong then the chicks will die. The message is by all means feed these magnificent birds but leave carcasses and bones as well as meat. Carl's talk was illustrated with many beautiful photographs which added to a memorable evening.