



Cover painting for *The Red Kite's Year*, Dan and Rosie Powell  
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## The return of the red kite

Red kites, once nearly extinct in Britain, have made an extraordinary comeback, with Mid Wales at the heart of this conservation success story, writes Roman Goergen

Gigrin Farm, near Rhayader in Mid Wales, is world-famous. Photographers gather here year-round to capture close-up and spectacular shots of a bird that could now rival the dragon as the emblem of Wales: the red kite. And yet, just a few decades ago, this bird of prey had almost completely disappeared from Britain.

It all began here in Rhayader in the early 1990s with a spaniel named Jamie. “Jamie kept killing rabbits, and the carcasses were left out for the few kites that remained,” recalls Dominique Powell, owner of Gigrin Farm. As more and more birds began to appear, the RSPB approached the farm with the idea of turning it into an official feeding station. Such help was desperately needed, as red kites were struggling at the time. In 1989, only 52 nests were recorded in Wales, and genetic studies conducted in 1997 suggested that, at that time, possibly just a single successfully breeding female was responsible for the survival of the entire Welsh population. “When we started feeding red kites here in 1992, only four or five birds would come each day. Today we have around 200 kites in the summer and up to 500 in the winter,” says Powell.

We watch the photographers’ hides on the farm, positioned in front of the field where, every afternoon, red kites are offered a rich meal of beef leftovers from a nearby

abattoir. Even before the first pieces of meat are laid out, a swirling cloud of over 100 birds forms over the field. Then, at precisely 3pm, the meat is scattered, and the kites dive. They snatch a piece in their talons, climb back up, and twist onto their backs in mid-air to fend off competitors. Red kites have a remarkable ability: they can eat their prey while flying.

These majestic raptors with their characteristic forked tails were considered extinct in England and Scotland as early as 1870. One major factor in their decline was the Victorian-era hobby of egg collecting, which took a severe toll on their numbers. Additionally, red kites were seen as competitors to human hunters, particularly in grouse shooting. To this day, Scotland remains a more dangerous place for red kites compared to other parts of the UK, as driven grouse shooting is still widely practised there. Many British farmers also feared the majestic bird, with myths circulating that a red kite could snatch an entire lamb.

By 1930, only a tiny population of an estimated 20 individuals survived in the mountainous region of Mid Wales. In 1989, a highly successful reintroduction programme was launched in England and Scotland, with red kites brought in from Spain, Sweden and Germany. Meanwhile, conservationists in Wales took a different

approach, focusing on rebuilding their severely depleted population from within. Feeding stations like the one at Gigrin Farm were established to support the birds.

“When the reintroduction project in England and Scotland began, we feared that the kites in Wales might not survive. Now we can see that the Welsh population has grown significantly and has even expanded into England,” explains ornithologist Ian Carter, who, at the time, oversaw the translocation of red kites from mainland Europe for English Nature (now Natural England).

Mid Wales’ Celtic rainforests have played a crucial role in the resurgence of the red kite. These temperate woodlands, characterised by ancient oaks, moss-covered branches, and thriving undergrowth, provide an essential habitat for a diverse range of species. The forests have long served as nesting sites for red kites, ensuring both shelter and a stable food supply. Ben Bonham, a conservation officer with the RSPB, underscores their importance: “Lots of these woodlands are massively important for the woodland bird communities and their lower plants, but unfortunately they aren’t always in the best condition just because they haven’t been managed in the right way for a long time,” he says, adding that conservation efforts now focus on enhancing these environments. “We’re managing three areas of woodland, making them better for Nature. We’re also looking to expand the woodland so that it becomes one interconnected block, which will obviously be able to support more species and the movement of different species.”

Red kites have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, expanding their range beyond their traditional upland strongholds. “Some people in the early stages really thought it wouldn’t work,” says Carter. “They thought this was a rare bird. It was doing really badly in most of Europe. People came to think of it as a bird of remote mountainous areas where remnant populations had managed to survive.” He explains that red kites were driven to upland areas due to persecution, but they are not strictly birds of the mountains. “Now we see them thriving in lowland areas, near towns, and even on the edges of cities.”

However, human influence has not always been beneficial. Illegal poisoning remains a significant issue in some areas, particularly in Scotland, where red kites have been slow to recover due to their proximity to grouse moors. “On the Black Isle, where red kites were reintroduced at the same time as in England, their population has remained artificially low,” says Carter. He attributes this to illegal persecution, explaining that while the release site itself is largely lowland farmland, nearby grouse moors pose a significant threat. Poison baits intended for other

predators also claim many kites as unintended victims. “There’s a massive contrast between what’s happened on the Black Isle and in southern England, where essentially the same number of birds were released over the same period. In southern England, we now have between 6,000 and 7,000 pairs of red kites, while on the Black Isle the population remains under 100 pairs.”

From the brink of extinction, red kites have made a dramatic recovery. The most recent surveys estimate over 2,000 breeding pairs in Wales alone, with populations in England and Scotland continuing to expand. “In southern England, the growth has been explosive. Some areas now have among the highest densities of breeding kites in Europe,” notes Carter.

The great success of red kites in Wales is also due to people’s attitudes. “Everyone here has a very positive view of the red kite because it is an important part of Welsh culture. Tourism is significant for us, and the red kite plays a major role in that,” emphasises Powell, adding how in the 1990s the farm demonstrated to neighbouring farmers that kites are not capable of carrying off lambs.

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The red kite’s recovery serves as a model for rewilding efforts across Britain. Carter notes that red kite conservation helped pave the way for other species’ return. “Reintroductions have become much more common in recent years. The first was the white-tailed sea eagle, and the red kite project used similar methods,” he explains. “Since then, we’ve seen reintroductions of ospreys and sea eagles in southern England, and projects with birds like corn buntings, corncrakes and great bustards.”

Looking ahead, Carter remains optimistic: “Come back in a few decades, and I think red kites will be the most abundant bird of prey in Britain, as it probably was in the past,” he concludes. “Their recovery shows what we can achieve with sustained conservation efforts and strong public support.”

Roman Goergen is a journalist reporting on natural sciences, biology and ecology. In 2021, after spending more than a decade in Southern Africa, he moved to London, from where he continues to focus on international conservation issues.