DESCRIPTION

This magnificently graceful bird of prey is unmistakable with its reddish-brown body, angled wings and deeply forked tail. It was saved from national extinction by one of the world’s longest running protection programmes, and has now been successfully re-introduced. It is an Amber List species because of its historical decline, which was due to persecution. The Red Kite’s diet consists mainly of small mammals such as mice, voles, shrews, young hares and rabbits. It feeds on a wide variety of carrion including sheep carcasses and dead game birds. As frequent scavengers, red kites are particularly susceptible to accidental poisoning from rodenticides or illegal poisoning from carrion laced with chemicals used to target foxes and crows, and sometimes specifically birds of prey, to prevent them eating game birds or livestock. Carbofuran is now banned but its illegal use continues, along with other poisons. Long-term prospects for the species are good, although population recovery has been slowed by this illegal poisoning, which still occurs in Scotland – particularly affecting recovery of birds on the Black Isle.

DISTRIBUTION

Almost the entire world breeding population of 18,000-24,000 breeding pairs is in Europe, with possibly a few pairs in Morocco. Around two thirds of the birds breed in Germany, with significant populations in France and Spain. However, the Spanish wintering population, which includes many of the German and French birds, has declined by 50% in 10 years – making UK red kites increasingly important on a global scale. The Scottish population is centred around the release sites in Dumfries and Galloway, Stirling-shire and west Perthshire, around Black Isle in Ross-shire, and on the outskirts of Aberdeen City. Of the 1,800-2,000 pairs of birds in the UK, about 200 pairs are in Scotland.

FURTHER INFO

RSPB website: http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/r/redkite
BBC website: http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/Red_Kite

ACTION REQUIRED

RSPB Scotland, SOC and partner organisations monitor the red kite population, and government agencies are an important part of this work. This should be supported.

In addition, RSPB Scotland/SOC work with the Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) and Scottish Government to identify cases of illegal poisoning. Enforcement and prosecution can continue to drive a reduction in this type of wildlife crime. It is crucial that wildlife crime prosecution remains a priority for the new single police force structure, and that the National Wildlife Crime Unit continues to be funded.

MSP SPECIES CHAMPION

Bill Kidd MSP

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