



To continue the theme of the Wildlife Group declaring 2024 as the 'Year of the Bird', this month's article focuses on Birds of Prey, also known as raptors. These elegant birds are a delight to see in the countryside hunting for prey or soaring on summer thermals. As predators, they are found towards the top of food chains and are important indicators of ecosystem health. If their populations are healthy this suggests that the other levels of the food chain are plentiful. Conversely, problems in the environment can be reflected in raptor populations. This was clearly evident in the 1960s when peregrine falcon populations declined due to the build-up of the pesticide DDT in their bodies. This chemical affected their fertility by causing the eggshells to be very thin meaning that the eggs often broke before they could hatch.

There are 15 species of raptors that breed in the UK with the most common species being the kestrel, sparrowhawk, buzzard and peregrine falcon. The most common ones to see around Plumpton and East Chiltington are kestrels and buzzards but sightings of red kites are increasing as this species spreads across the country after being successfully reintroduced to England and Scotland. There are an estimated 4,600 breeding pairs of red kites now in the UK.

Two other species of raptors have been re-introduced into the country after being driven to extinction, the osprey and the white-tailed eagle. The latter is the largest bird of prey in the country with a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres. There are thought to be around 150 breeding pairs (2020 estimate) with most of these found on the west coast of Scotland. In 2019 a project to re-introduce white tailed eagles to England from the Isle of Wight was started by [Forestry England](#) and the [Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation](#). The plan is to release 60 eagles with the hope that 6 - 8 breeding pairs will become established. The released eagles are fitted with satellite trackers and have roamed widely over England with sightings reported from West Sussex, East Anglia, the West Country as well as northern Scotland and even as far as southern Sweden. In the summer of 2023 one pair successfully reared a chick in southern England, the first white tailed eagle to fledge from a nest in the wild in England for more than 240 years! More information on the project and for individual eagles is available on the [Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation's website](#).

Sadly, raptors are still persecuted across the country. Birds of prey have been protected by law in the UK since the introduction of the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981. Anyone harming a raptor or its nest can be prosecuted. However, it is often difficult to obtain enough evidence to prosecute. The RSPB reported that there were 61 cases of raptor persecution in the UK in 2022 but only two prosecutions that year. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the incidents occurred in connection with land managed for gamebird shooting ([RSPB Birdcrime Report 2022](#)). Intensive management on some gamebird estates includes the illegal killing of birds of prey. A range of raptor species are lost in this way including more common ones such as buzzards and peregrines but also rare species such as hen harriers and white-tailed eagles. To date, five white tailed eagles have been persecuted by poisoning in the UK, including two from the re-introduction project in England. One of these was poisoned on a pheasant shooting estate in West Sussex after ingesting a highly toxic insecticide. This was the first confirmed case of illegal persecution of a white-tailed eagle in the country since their reintroduction. Suspected raptor persecutions can be reported to the RSPB using their raptor crime hotline (0300 999 0101) or via the [RSPB website](#).

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