

Wingers

All great birdwatchers were once children with binoculars

Kite chick and egg in tree-top nest.
(Damian Clarke/NPWS)



Look up! Kites are here again

During the Middle Ages, Red Kites were a common bird of prey in Ireland. But poisoning and persecution drove them to extinction and they ceased nesting here over 200 years ago. In 2007, an attempt was launched to try to bring them back to Ireland, using nestlings from Wales.

2007 – The adventure begins in Wicklow

The first chicks are brought from Wales to Wicklow. They are just 5 to 7 weeks old. The birds are held in specially designed aviaries until mature enough for release. Released birds will carry wing tags and small radio transmitters so that their welfare can be monitored from a distance.

2010 – Success! Kites raise young in Ireland for first time in over 200 years

Most of the kites have survived the winter and they are keen to nest. Twelve chicks are raised in seven nests in Wicklow and a further four pairs raise five chicks in Down.



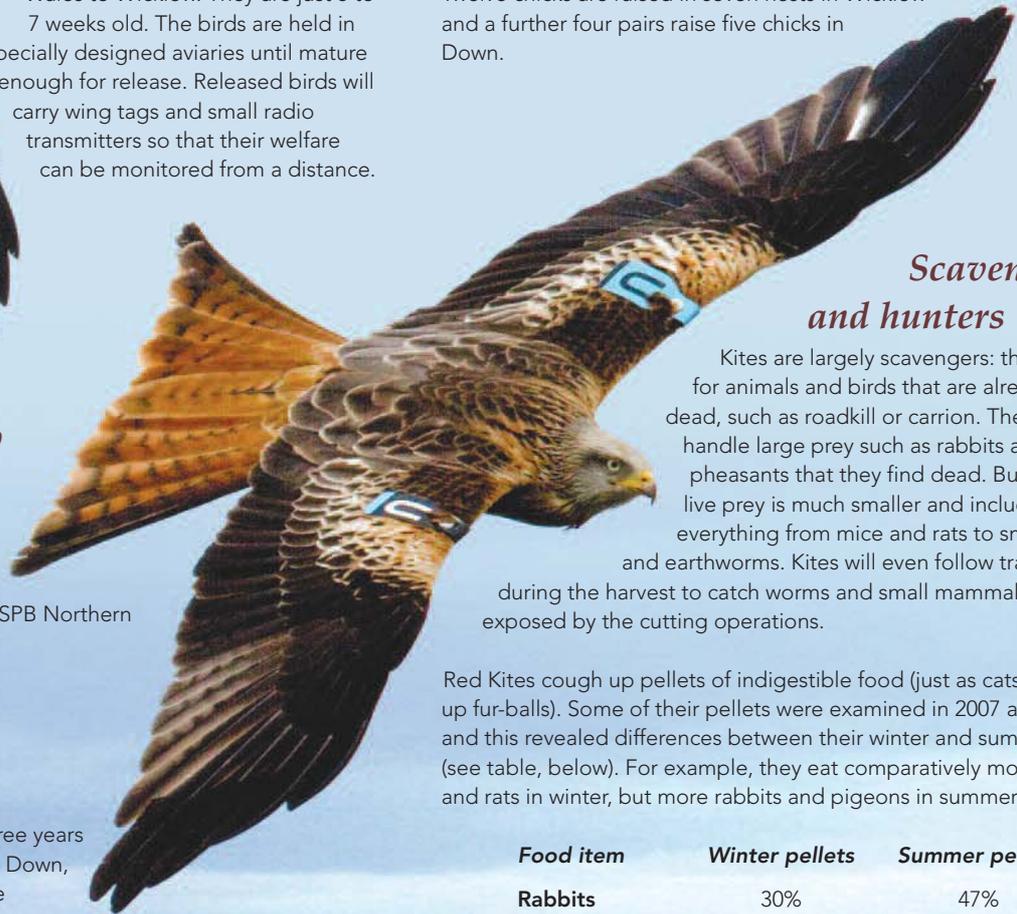
Released kites in flight in Wicklow.
– (Shay Connolly)

2008 – Start-up in Down

As the Wicklow project enters its second year, a sister project gets underway in County Down, organised by RSPB Northern Ireland. It starts releasing young kites in August.

2009 – First breeding efforts

With 81 kites released over three years in Wicklow, and a further 53 in Down, the first breeding attempts are recorded in Wicklow. Two pairs nest and lay eggs, but they are unsuccessful. No young birds are raised by these first-time nesters.



Scavengers and hunters

Kites are largely scavengers: they search for animals and birds that are already dead, such as roadkill or carrion. They can handle large prey such as rabbits and pheasants that they find dead. But their live prey is much smaller and includes everything from mice and rats to small birds and earthworms. Kites will even follow tractors during the harvest to catch worms and small mammals exposed by the cutting operations.

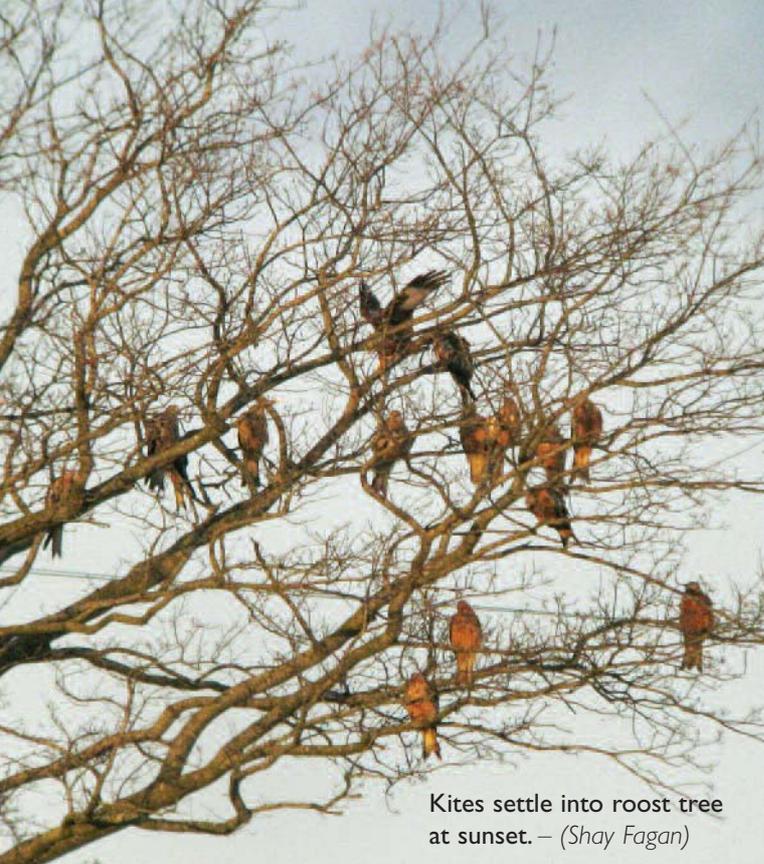
Red Kites cough up pellets of indigestible food (just as cats cough up fur-balls). Some of their pellets were examined in 2007 and 2008 and this revealed differences between their winter and summer diets (see table, below). For example, they eat comparatively more mice and rats in winter, but more rabbits and pigeons in summer.

Food item	Winter pellets	Summer pellets
Rabbits	30%	47%
Mice & shrews	21%	7%
Rats	17%	7%
Woodpigeons	6%	16%
Pheasants	5%	6%
Worms	7%	–
Crows	–	2%

Factfile Red Kite

Scientific name: *Milvus milvus*
Old Irish name: Préachán Ceirteach, the Cloth Kite, from its habit of dressing its nest with rags.
Wingspan: 175-195 cm
Body Length: 60-65 cm
Life-span: Up to 25 years, but usually 8 to 10 years.

Hay-making in Red Kite country. – (Oran O'Sullivan)



Kites settle into roost tree at sunset. – (Shay Fagan)



All released kites carry identifying wing tags. – (Shay Connolly)

Kite roosts

Sharing is caring

Birds of prey are usually solitary, but kites are different: they are sociable and often gather together in numbers to roost, particularly in winter when birds will congregate from early afternoon. It is thought that Red Kites roost together so that birds can collectively share information on feeding areas. The birds follow a leader out in the morning.

Kite watching

A majestic sight in the sky

Though kites have wandered to all parts of the country, the counties that hosted the reintroductions are still naturally best for sightings.

In Northern Ireland, the RSPB organises kite viewing events in Tollymore Forest Park near Castlewellan, Co Down, and in Wicklow you can base yourself in some of the key villages that form 'the Kite Triangle': Rathdrum, Redcross and Avoca. The car park opposite the church in Avoca village is as good a spot as any to view the kites, though you can come face to face with kites nearly anywhere along the roads linking the villages.

- The Red Kite Reintroduction Project in County Wicklow is a partnership project of the Golden Eagle Trust, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, The Heritage Council and the Welsh Kite Trust.
- This article by Oran O'Sullivan is based on information from the Red Kite information booklet for fifth and sixth classes, published by the Golden Eagle Trust. More information on www.goldeneagle.ie.

Kite threats

Healthy kites = healthy countryside

Kites can fall victim to illegal shooting, poisoning, disturbance at nest sites, electrocution on power lines, etc. As an apex predator at the top of the food chain, Red Kites don't have too many natural enemies to contend with. However, they are prone to any poison lower down the food chain, so a rat that has eaten poisoned seed dressing and is in turn eaten by a kite and fed to its young will result in the young kite dying. Similarly, poison can build up over a period of time in adult birds and eventually kill them.

Nesting

High as a kite!

Kites build their nest high up in a tree, such as an oak. The nest of sticks is lined with sheep's wool and decorated with rags and assorted rubbish. They nest in March and usually lay three eggs around the beginning of April. There then follows a month of egg incubation until the chicks hatch. The downy chicks take another seven or eight weeks to fledge, when they can fly and leave the nest. They continue to be fed by their parents until the autumn, when they become more independent. It takes at least another two years before the young birds are ready to find a mate and nest.



Kite chicks in nest lined with sheep's wool. At least two rats, one half-eaten, can be seen. – (Dominian Clarke/NPWS)

