

Red Kite Reintroduction Project in Wicklow

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Mr Dick Roche, T.D., Minister for the Environment Heritage and Local Government today (21 May 07) announced a programme to restore the Red Kite, a native bird of prey to the Republic of Ireland. This international, co-operative project follows the success of the Golden Eagle Reintroduction Project in Donegal and the outstanding success of several Red Kite reintroduction projects in Britain. The birds are to be transported under licence from Wales, which is a stronghold of the species, and released in selected locations in the east of Ireland. The project is to start this year with the release of up to thirty kites in Wicklow. A partner project on the release of kites in Northern Ireland is proposed to begin in 2008.

The Red Kite, which was once common and widespread in these islands, became extinct in Ireland in the eighteenth century due to persecution, poisoning and woodland clearance. Although the birds are natural scavengers, they feed extensively on earthworms, insects and small mammals such as rabbits. The Red Kite does not present any threat to livestock and in parts of the UK they have become major tourist attractions as they perform spectacular aerial displays.

The Wicklow Red Kite Project is a partnership between the Golden Eagle Trust, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) and the Welsh Kite Trust. It is funded by grants from DEHLG and the Heritage Council.

The Red Kite is so called because of its reddish brown body and tail. Its tail is deeply forked making it an easily recognisable bird. Kites have a wingspan of up to 1.8m

Kites normally breed in their second or third year. They build stick nests in trees, their nests are lined with wool. Prior to laying, kites often decorate their nests with scraps of cloth and paper, prompting Shakespeare to write in *A Winters Tale* "*When the kite builds, look to lesser linen*". They lay 2-3 eggs. We would expect breeding in Ireland by 2010.

The Irish name for the Red Kite is *An Préachan Ceirteach*, the "Cloth Kite". This name is derived from the habit of stealing cloths mentioned above.

Kites take a very wide range of prey. Carrion is an important part of the diet in winter. Kites also primarily take small mammals, crows, pigeons, insects and worms. Due to their small feet and weak beaks, kites are not particularly powerful predators.

The kite was driven to extinction in Ireland and all parts of Britain except for Wales. A remnant population of the Red Kites managed to survive in the remote Welsh Uplands. At its lowest point there were only three breeding pairs of kites. Today due to the efforts of the Welsh Kite Trust, landowners and Welsh farmers there is a population of around 600 breeding pairs.

The Welsh Kite Trust is a registered charity devoted to the conservation of the Red Kite in Wales. The Welsh Kite Trust will be in charge of the monitoring and collecting of the kite chicks from Wales. For more information on the Welsh Kite Trust see www.welshkitetrust.org

The Red Kite project is part of Ireland's wider efforts to help halt the decline, and even increase our national Biodiversity. In particular, Ireland has the lowest range of birds of prey and owls in Europe.

Just like the proposed Red Kite project, a reintroduction programme to restore Golden Eagles in Donegal began in 2001. This programme is being carried out by a partnership between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Golden Eagle Trust Ltd.

The Department is also funding a programme, through the Heritage Council and managed by BirdWatch Ireland, which is examining the specific ecological needs of Barn Owls and erecting Barn Owl nest boxes.

These initiatives will help stabilise and enhance Ireland's native raptors over the years and restore some of our most thrilling wildlife.

Red Kites fly again in Wicklow after 200 years

19/07/07

Mr John Gormley, T.D., Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, was today (19 July 07) present as up to 30 young Red Kites were introduced to the wild in Co Wicklow as the start of the programme to restore this native bird of prey to Ireland.

"These wonderful birds became extinct in Ireland more than 200 years ago because of habitat change and persecution" said Minister Gormley. "From today they can be seen again in the skies above County Wicklow. This project to reintroduce the red kite shows what we can achieve here in Ireland in terms of protecting and enhancing our natural heritage."

Ireland's big birds of prey were all lost over the past two centuries, due to human activities. However since 2000, a series of restoration projects have begun to address this.

Minister Gormley said: *"The kites' return is a significant addition to our biodiversity and a wonderful complement to the golden eagle and white-tailed eagle restoration projects" he said. "This work is at the core of one of the heritage elements in the Programme for Government and I am delighted to see this early progress."*

The Wicklow Red Kite Project is a partnership between the Golden Eagle Trust, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Welsh Kite Trust. It is funded by grants from the Minister's Department and the Heritage Council. The kite chicks came from Wales. Minister Gormley paid tribute to the persistent hard work of the Golden Eagle Trust, whose vision and work has been so productive in recent years. *"This and the other eagle projects could only come to fruition through co-operation between conservationists, landowners and the Department. The kite project is an excellent model for the future,"* concluded Minister Gormley.

The Project Manager, Damian Clarke said: *"As a native of Wicklow I am delighted that this county has been chosen as the first release site for the reintroduction of this spectacular bird to Ireland. I look forward to working closely with local farmers, landowners, community and recreational interests. In future years these beautiful birds will become another tourist attraction in the Garden of Ireland, as they have done in Wales"*

Tony Cross, of the Welsh Kite Trust, said: *"We are incredibly excited at this collaboration as it takes us into the next stage of the recovery of the Red Kite's fortunes. It is great that Welsh birds are being used as they must be the most similar genetically to what Ireland had in the past. It also gives the project a nice Celtic link which has gone down well with Welsh farmers who have generously allowed some of "their" birds to be collected."*

The Red Kite is a bird of mixed lowland countryside. Its primary nesting habitat is woodland but it may spend a large amount of time feeding in farmland and hedgerow. The birds spend a part of each day soaring above the landscape in order to search for food. The birds are individually marked with numbered wing tags so that they can be relocated and their survival

monitored. The first sign of breeding behaviour by these Red Kites in Ireland is expected to occur by 2010. . Although the birds are natural scavengers, they feed extensively on earthworms, small mammals such as rats and rabbits and birds such as magpies and other crows. The Red Kite does not present any threat to livestock and in parts of the UK they have become major tourist attractions as they perform spectacular aerial displays.

Good views of flying Red Kites can be expected at various locations in Co Wicklow over the next few months. Any information on sightings of the birds, including date, locality and identifying features should be sent to the Project Manager, damianclarke@goldeneagle.ie.

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