

## NORTH EAST RED KITE BREEDING REPORT FOR 2011

### 2011 results at a glance (2010 figure in brackets)

19 known active territories (27)

18 known incubating females (19)

12 nests (13) successfully fledging 24 (24) young

6 failures (6), 3 at the egg stage and 3 early after hatching.

1 nest not used following refurbishment.

17 of the known active territories were in Gateshead. County Durham held the other two territories in the Causey and Beamish area, with pairs successfully fledging five young (broods of 3 and 2).

### RED KITES VICTIM OF HARSH WINTER?

The harshest and most prolonged winter weather for three decades may have affected the breeding success and expansion of the region's re-introduced Red Kite population.

The result was a 'standstill year' with no increase in breeding pairs or fledged young and successful nesting once again confined to the 'core' area around the Derwent Valley, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, and the Causey and Beamish district, just over the County Durham boundary.

There was no indication of a spread into surrounding districts and, for the first time since breeding recommenced after a gap of 170 years, no evidence of nesting within Northumberland although birds were seen regularly in some localities, particularly along the Tyne Valley.

However, the encouraging news was that three pairs of kites succeeded in fledging broods of three young, compared with only one set of 'triplets' in 2010.



One of the broods of three young and their toy seal head

2011 was the second year in which responsibility for monitoring was undertaken by the Friends of Red Kites (FoRK), the organisation made up of former volunteers with the Northern Kites project which released 93 kites from the Chilterns over a three-year period. Ringing, wing-tagging, completing BTO Nest Record Cards and reporting to the Rare Birds Breeding Panel was also undertaken by FoRK.

Early season survey work indicated around 19 active territories, 17 in the re-introduction area and two in the closely adjoining area of County Durham. Disappointingly, no active sites were found in Northumberland or elsewhere in Durham, despite much hard searching by the monitoring teams.

Eighteen pairs produced eggs and of these 12 pairs went on to fledge a total of 24 young. This was very similar to 2010 when 13 pairs fledged 24 young. In our report for 2010 we suggested that was a very good result in view of the severe winter of 2009-10. However, the monitoring team felt that the even harsher and more prolonged freezing conditions which faced the kites last winter may have resulted in the loss of some birds and have left others in a poor state to face the rigours of the breeding season.

During June and July 12 young were ringed and nine, which were sufficiently developed, were wing tagged by Keith Bowey and Ian Kerr and Ken Sanderson. 12 other young were not ringed or tagged because they were too large to handle safely and could have 'jumped,' or were already out of the nests.

The 2011 youngsters were fitted with white tags with black lettering on their right wings with the normal Northern project tag of pink on the left wing. Anyone seeing a tagged kite can report it through the FoRK website, [www.friendsofredkites.org.uk](http://www.friendsofredkites.org.uk) or via their county bird recorders.

Six pairs failed during incubation or when they had small chicks. At one of these nest a female died whilst incubating and the body was eventually blown down and recovered. However, because of its condition no cause of death could be established. At the final site, a successful 2010 nest was refurbished and then deserted without eggs being laid.

There was no indication of the cause of the failures which were probably due to natural causes. It is worth mentioning that during 2011 some Peregrine sites in Northumberland failed during to bad weather so our kites may have suffered too. Careful examination of the failed sites showed no evidence of deliberate human interference. However, one was under a well-used footpath and another appeared to suffer regular disturbance from youngsters using a mountain bike route.

Several other pairs displayed and showed some territorial behaviour but no nests were found. During the coming winter, when trees are bare, co-ordinated searches are to be made of the areas involved to check for any nests which were missed so that they can be visited during 2012.

Among the 2011 pairs, both successful and unsuccessful, some birds appeared with new partners, perhaps a sign that others may not have survived the winter.

As in previous years, various odd items of decoration were found at nests, the most unusual being the head of a toy seal in one of the nests containing three chicks.

As in 2010, a rather worrying aspect was that almost all the successful breeding took place in the 'core' re-introduction area with little sign of birds spreading out to colonise new districts, apart from the two pairs in the Causey and Beamish area. This raised fears that as well as winter mortality further illegal persecution could be involved. For example, in west Northumberland where kites bred in earlier years, a total of five poisoning victims have so far been found in areas with game-bird shoots. It appears that area remains a 'black hole' for kites trying to move into otherwise ideal nesting habitats.

The situation led FoRK to organise a series of talks to various organisations in the area culminating in a public event in Hexham in March to launch a 'Think Kite – Act Right' campaign, which resulted in a lot of positive publicity in both the local and regional press and on radio and television.

During the event much information was received from local residents and farmers who believed they had seen kites in the district. One of the monitoring teams spent long hours checking out all of these reports and although they located many pairs of Buzzards no kites were found.

**IAN KERR and KEN SANDERSON (on behalf of FoRK)**