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Hogg, Angus; Grant, David

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Ayrshire Birding

For people interested in wild birds in Ayrshire

Red Kites Breeding in Ayrshire

Background – Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*) formerly nested in Glen App during the early 1830s, but vanished as a breeding species soon afterwards (Gray & Anderson 1869). The last 19th century sighting of a live bird was at Lendalfoot during Oct-Nov 1892, by which time the species had become extinct over much of Scotland, largely due to persecution and egg-collection. Between 1856 and 1859 Gray recorded it breeding in Argyll (Bonaw), and Loch Lomond around the same time.

Since that time, Red Kite has remained a rare visitor to Ayrshire – until 1989, when they were re-introduced to several parts of the UK. A steady increase in sightings resulted from their re-introduction to Dumfries and Galloway in 2001, after which time records within Ayrshire became almost annual, often involving more than one bird after 2010, as the breeding numbers in D&G increased.

During the early months of 2022, a chance remark about two Red Kites in a remote Ayrshire valley aroused AH's interest, and he decided to follow it up. Observations at the site suggested territorial behaviour, focussed on a small patch of mixed woodland. The next move was to try and obtain more information which might indicate a nesting attempt, and DG agreed to help watch the site at this point. A careful watch was set up from a distance of approximately 1 km in order not to cause disturbance at this very sensitive period in the breeding cycle.

During the period from 18th March to early April, observations were made of both birds attending one particular stand of mature, mixed woodland, although it was not certain which tree had been selected. It was noticeable, however, that both birds appeared to have become very cautious on their approach to the wood. The two birds would circle high, with frequent calling during this time but, whenever one descended to enter the wood, the route taken was quite circuitous and made good use of the contours of the surrounding landscape to mask its approach, a feature noted by several other authors.

During March, it became evident that, while both birds were spending a lot of time near the wood, they were also engaged in tussles with corvids, often during the morning. A lot of their time appeared to be taken up with chasing off inquisitive Carrion Crows, or fending off Rooks from a nearby Rookery. Both adults were frequently mobbed as they circled above the wood or attempted to enter it. It was during one such skirmish that the male was seen to have small pieces of sheep wool clinging to his breast feathers – an indication, perhaps, of nest-lining being taken into the wood. By the end of March, both birds could still be seen, quite frequently, circling above the wood, especially during the morning, but only one bird would now do most of the foraging trips away from the nest. Any time spent away from the nest site was also becoming shorter.



The male Red Kite approaching the nest site (Angus Hogg)

During early April some nest material could still be seen being carried into the wood – mostly small branches – and it was assumed to be the male doing most of this, the female now being seen much less often. Hunting trips by the male mostly took between 20 and 30 minutes, but he was often away for longer in the afternoons.

On the 29th of April, early signs of wing moult could be seen on the inner primaries of the male, on P1 in particular, which made it easier to identify him. Early May was marked by things at the nest site being very quiet. The male continued his hunting trips, and often appeared to be “missing” for long periods, although it’s possible that his return to the nest could have occasionally been missed. His wing moult on P1 and P2 was now more obvious. The local sheep farmer, who was extremely supportive and fed regular information on the birds to us, often commented that one bird would regularly circle above him while he was on his quad bike checking his sheep on the nearby hillside. At no time did it seem alarmed, but would, nevertheless, remain above him until he had left the immediate vicinity of the wood.

It was still relatively quiet by mid-May, but “crow-bashing” was quite regular, mostly involving the male, who would forcefully remove any intruding Carrion Crows or Jackdaws. On May 25th the male was, once more, observed on foraging trips during the early afternoon, but was seen to make three return trips with food within an hour. It was felt that this increase in feeding might just indicate the presence of young in the nest. However, just when you think you are starting to understand the patterns of activity at a nest site, the birds did something which was both puzzling and concerning. On May 28th there was no sign of any activity between 09.30 and 11.45 hrs. Had they failed? Much to our relief, an afternoon visit to the site saw the female come off the nest briefly to ward off some crows. Her actions now, certainly suggested that she was guarding something!

June 2nd produced even more evidence of possible success, when both adult birds were seen foraging, returning frequently to the nest, which had now, finally, been identified as being in a mature Oak (*Quercus robur*), near the edge of the wood. The male who had, by now, moulted out both P1 and P2 on each wing, would remain near the nest while the female was foraging. Food drops were becoming very frequent – on June 7th, the male returned to the nest 4 times within 90 minutes.

Towards the end of June, the frequent feeding trips continued, and it was quite obvious that both birds were feeding young at the nest, which could now be seen through a gap in the branches, from a different vantage point. July 2nd was a red-letter day when, at long last, a young bird could be seen moving around on the nest. It was nearly fully-grown, and often the only indication of its presence would be the sight of its long, forked tail dangling down from the branches above the nest. Both adults continued to be very attentive, making frequent food drops, and chasing off intruders, including a Common Buzzard, which was nesting in a conifer stand across the valley. During this period, one of the adults, often the female, would sit high up in a nearby conifer, watching the nest for any potential threat.

In early July the juvenile could be seen wing-exercising and moving around near the nest, but always below the canopy. By July 11th it had become more mobile, and was clambering around, quite clumsily at first, making its way from the nest on to branches of adjacent trees. It was gaining in confidence by July 14th, when it started moving around within the wood, being joined on one occasion by the male who landed beside it. The adult female was now away from the nest site more frequently, and for much longer periods, perhaps feeding herself rather than the juvenile.

On July 18th the juvenile was flying with some confidence and made short flights above the canopy, out over the nearby fields. By July 21st, it flew out from the wood to meet the incoming male who, by the 27th, was returning much less frequently, often absent for over 2 hours. However, the juvenile was now flying much more strongly and appeared almost capable of independence. This trend continued towards the end of the month and, by early August, both the adult male and the juvenile had almost disappeared from the area, the female having left earlier, during mid-July.



The juvenile appears above the wood (Angus Hogg)

In total, 75 hours of observation were carried out at the site. The weather was, for the most part, favourable to the birds, with only short periods of wet and windy weather. The nest site was well protected from strong winds from virtually all directions, and the nest itself benefitted from having a dense canopy of Oak leaves above it. Another "bonus" came from the fact that the farmer, on whose land it nested, was well-known to AH, and came from a family who have long maintained an active interest in local wildlife. His interest and enthusiasm only increased when the significance of this nesting attempt was mentioned to him. Our thanks are also due to George Christie, formerly in charge of the Red Kite re-introduction programme in Dumfries and Galloway. He was an invaluable source of advice, especially when my book-based resources failed to provide answers to questions. Thanks to his observations on our notes, he commented that the birds were probably first-time breeders.

Finally, to make matters even better, it was later announced that a second pair of Red Kites had bred in a different part of Ayrshire in 2022, rearing two chicks. These represent the first successful breeding records in Ayrshire for almost 200 years. Hopefully, this is a trend which will continue, and this beautiful raptor will once again become a common sight in Ayrshire skies.

Angus Hogg and Dave Grant
16 January 2023

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