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Boda Wennol

Cylchlythyr Ymddiriedolaeth Barcudiaid Cymru
The Newsletter of the Welsh Kite Trust

Kite monitoring results for 2017 ** Update on Kestrels ** Welsh Kites in Ireland - How did They Fare? **WKT Plans for 2018

Photo: Tony Cross

WELCOME to the 30th issue of **Boda Wennol**, the online newsletter for the Welsh Kite Trust. This issue reports on the monitoring results for 2017, and gives an update on the ongoing work of the Trust.

New Website

Firstly, a big thank you to all our supporters for bearing with us during the transition to our new online operation. This has been a steep learning curve for us, though well worth the effort, as the costs saved will be made available to achieve much more in terms of conservation, which is our primary cause.

The feedback from our existing supporters has been overwhelmingly positive, with almost all those who got in touch with us offering continued support, and this has been very encouraging. Many thanks to those who have got back to us; we have tried to respond individually, though for a time all the forwarded messages via the contact form of the website were being automatically marked as SPAM, and so we may have accidentally missed a few responses. We welcome any comments or suggestions at any time so if you have anything to tell us then please get in touch, either via the Contact us page on the website or by using the Trust email address; **admin@welshkitetrust.wales**.

Based on the feedback given, we have opted for a simple website without membership and associated passwords and login details. We did not receive a single response in support of this idea, and many responses expressed a wish to keep the site open to all and not have to remember passwords. One of the advantages of this system is that any results of our research projects and monitoring reports will be made more widely available, which can only be a good thing in terms of raptor conservation.

Other suggestions that we have received include providing regular updates and better links to the progress of the two reintroduction schemes in Ireland and Northern Ireland. A summary article is included later in this newsletter and links will be created very soon from the website.

As in the past, the Trust will continue the policy of never revealing exact nest locations and will never pass on any personal data to anyone.

Future Projects in 2018

The Trust is very pleased to be supporting a detailed merlin survey of mid-Wales including the Elenydd SPA, Plynlimon, and Mynydd Mallaen. Surveying and monitoring breeding merlins is a specialist task, and it is not possible to collect meaningful data with casual observations. Many regular visitors to these areas report an apparent decline, even though the last national survey, in 2008, reported an increase in Wales. It is suspected that the random square survey methods adopted by this survey has delivered a spurious result, so in conjunction with Ecology Matters Trust we aim to complete a full survey of all suitable habitat, rather than base a survey on samples.

Kite Monitoring in 2017

Red Kite 2017	Nests	Successful Nests	% Successful	Fledged	Fledged per Nest	Fledged per Successful Nest
Shropshire	28	19	67.9	32	1.14	1.68
East Powys	27	16	59.3	20	0.74	1.25
Pembrokeshire	10	5	50	5	0.5	1
SN72	38	25	65.8	32	0.84	1.28
SN82	17	8	47.1	8	0.47	1
SN92	12	9	75	13	1.08	1.44
SN73	14	11	78.6	11	0.79	1
SN83	10	6	60	7	0.7	1.17
SN93	13	8	61.5	8	0.62	1
Other	11	6	54.5	8	0.73	1.33
Total	**180**	**113**	**62.8**	**144**	**0.8**	**1.27**

During 2017 180 kite nests were monitored by WKT, which greatly exceeds our minimum target of 100, which is considered a big enough sample to be statistically robust. The details of the monitored nests are summarised in the above table.

The broad picture is business as usual; the number of young fledged per breeding attempt is 0.80, almost exactly the same as in 2016 (0.82). The long-term average since 1994 is 0.90, but it is expected that the productivity per pair will begin to fall due to competition for food during the breeding season as the density of breeding pairs increases. What is surprising is how little change there has been so far, suggesting that the red kite population is still in recovery and is likely to reach a higher density than at present, even within the core areas.

A lot of effort goes on behind the scenes to produce this summary, with most nests receiving at least three field visits. Some of the nests are easy to locate because they are in previously used sites, but a significant number are either new or involve pairs that have relocated. These situations may require considerable extra field work, especially if the adults are keen to avoid detection. One pair in Ceredigion definitely didn't go to great lengths to hide: they nested in a garden. The lucky human residents got the chance to see the breeding behaviour of kites in a lot more detail than most field workers. The final outcome was a happy one with two chicks fledging but it was touch and go during early June when bad weather resulted in the adults being unable to provision enough food. The smaller chick came close to starvation, and wasn't seen for several days, and was assumed dead. A week later, it began to recover and was seen to stick its head up again, though it didn't fledge until a full month after its older sibling, despite being only two or three days younger.

This is a reminder that the weather during the breeding season is the biggest single influence on breeding success. Sites that are at high elevation or those on the coast are particularly vulnerable to gales with rain during May and early June. The long term monitoring program will be able to pick up any changes in nest success, though it has to be said that the trend since 1994 is static, with a few poor years such as 2000 and 2012, balanced by the occasional bumper years. In 2017, 63% of nests were successful, a figure that is identical to the long term average.

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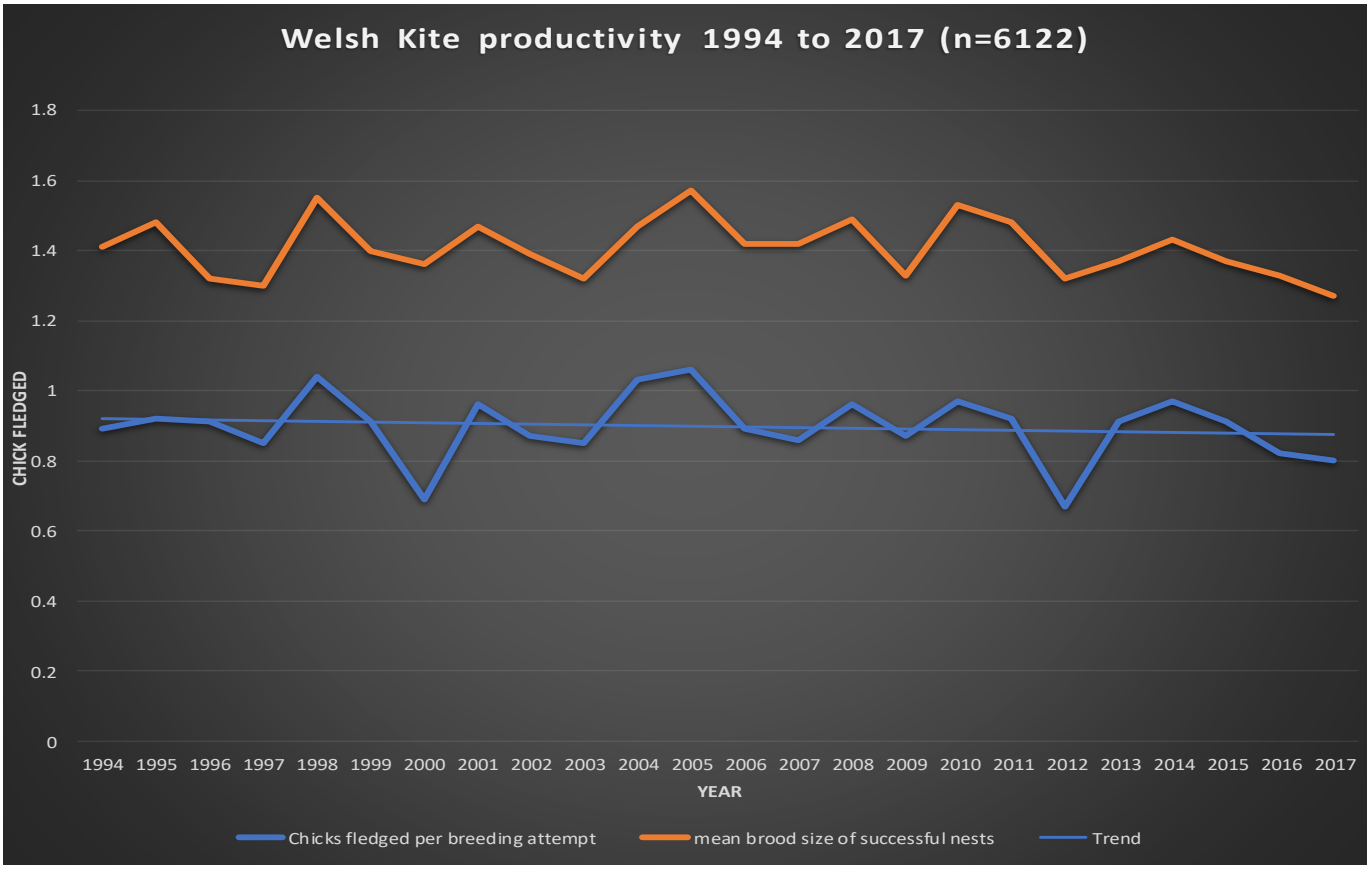
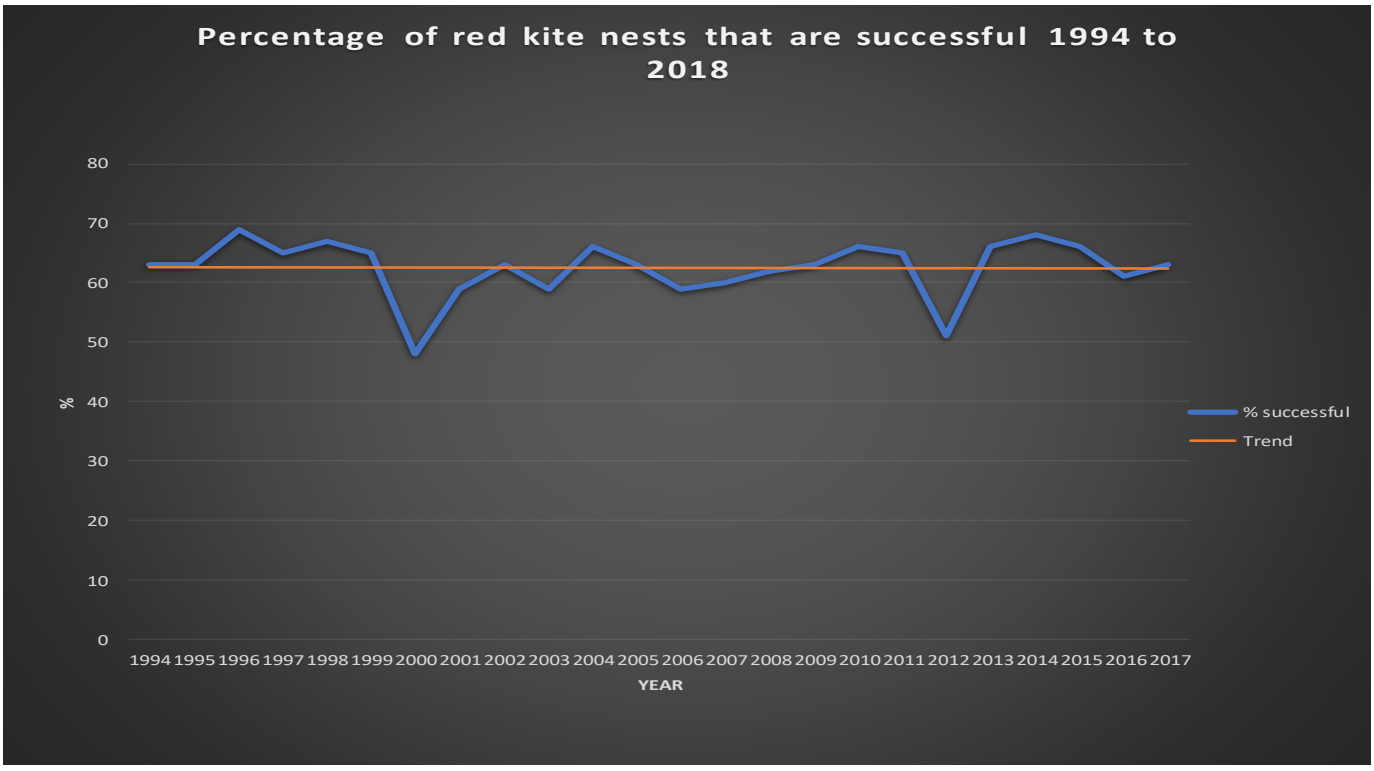
Long Term Trends for Red Kite Productivity and Breeding Success



Although there are fluctuations the long-term trend in the number of chicks fledged per breeding attempt has hardly changed. This suggests that that the population has yet to reach its maximum, even in the core areas.



The percentage of breeding attempts that are successful has fluctuated since 1994, but the trend is unchanged with a long-term average of 63%. The two obvious low points coincide with especially wet spring weather in 2000 and 2012.

Kestrels in 2017

Breeding Success

Altogether in 2017 fifteen nests were monitored, five of which received multiple visits. The results are summarised in the table below.

Kestrels 2017	Mid and North Wales *	Pembs	Total
Nests monitored	10	5	**15**
Successful	10	4	**14**
Chicks Fledged	46	12	**58**
Chicks colour-ringed	46	7	**53**
Chicks/ breeding attempt	4.6	2.4	**3.9**
Chicks per successful nest	4.6	3	**4.1**

* Based on single visits at the chick stage.

In Pembrokeshire, one nest failed at the egg stage for unknown reasons, though the male was still present in the vicinity. Nearby, a dead barn owl was also picked at a nest box. Rodenticide poisoning is suspected to be a possible cause of death, though the corpse was disposed of before we could arrange a toxin analysis with PBMS. The other four Pembrokeshire nests that were monitored all fledged chicks, albeit with smaller brood sizes than the nests in Mid and North Wales (a mean of three compared with 4.6). It is not possible to assess nest success for the latter group because no visits were made at the egg stage. However, nest failure rates with kestrel are typically very low (<10%) from nest boxes.

The mean number of chicks that fledged from successful nests in 2017 (4.1) is identical to the recent all Wales figure, based on a sample of 105 nests since 2008. This gives confidence to the interpretation in 2016 that population decline is being driven by a decrease in the survival of full grown birds, rather than by a reduction in breeding success.

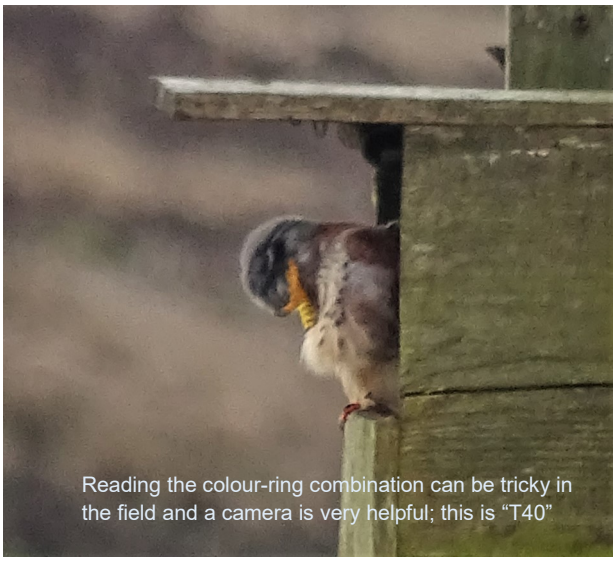
A brood of kestrels eagerly awaiting the chance to have colour-rings fitted

(photo: Sally Light)

Kestrels in 2017: continued

Colour-ringing

A further 53 colour-rings were added to nestlings in 2017, bringing the total ringed since 2011 to 375. The rings are sometimes difficult to read in the field because kestrels typically perch with their legs concealed by feathering. They are best read from a photograph and the majority of re-sightings that have been reported from birds seen in the field have relied on a zoomed-in photo. The image of "T40" perched at a nest box took three visits before the combination could be read with confidence. We therefore urge anyone taking photographs of kestrels to have a good look at the images to see if any colour-rings are present. All birds marked as part of the WKT scheme have a yellow ring on the left leg with a letter and two digits.



Reading the colour-ring combination can be tricky in the field and a camera is very helpful; this is "T40"

A colour-ringed male "T40" recorded in early April at a nest box in the Preseli area, Pembrokeshire, was subsequently proven to be breeding there (see photo above). This turned out to be the very same box he fledged from two seasons previously. This means that he is possibly paired with his mother, though seeing as she is not ringed, this cannot be confirmed. Whatever the relationship, they reared a brood of three, all of which were colour-ringed.

Also in Pembrokeshire, a six-year old female "P26" was found dying on Tenby beach in mid-June. She was taken to a local bird rescue centre, but unfortunately died later that day. Gulls had attacked her, though it is very likely that she was already either ill or injured before they became interested. This bird had lived in Tenby since 2012, after fledging from a nest 16km away in 2011. She was very confiding and was frequently photographed by visitors to Tenby. She bred annually at an inaccessible site in the nearby cliffs, and it was unfortunately never possible to monitor her breeding success.

Although the colour-ringing programme has recorded some substantial movements (the furthest is over 1000km from the ringing site), one of the most notable results has been the very low number of kestrels that are subsequently resighted as breeding adults. The low resighting rate cannot be taken as direct evidence of very low survival, because it may be at least partially due to the difficulties in detecting and reading the rings, as described above. However, in 2016 almost all 22 breeding adults in Pembs were scrutinised for colour-rings and only one ("P26") was found, the Tenby female. "T40", in 2017, was only the second record of a bird born in Pembrokeshire returning to breed in the area. This implies that either their first breeding site is not that strongly influenced by their natal site, or indeed as suspected, survival between fledging and breeding for the time is low.

There are at least ten instances of colour-ringed juveniles dispersing to other areas in the first autumn following fledging, and these will be summarised in a future report once a meaningful number of resightings has been accumulated. Juvenile dispersal and subsequent settling to breed are two aspects of kestrel ecology that are poorly understood, and in urgent need of further research. At the moment WKT is assessing the feasibility of fitting GPS tags to young birds to try and gain a better understanding of the habitats that they use and survival rates during the first few months. In conjunction with the colour-ringing programme, these research methods may lead to a better understanding of the reasons behind the population declines that currently being experienced.

Welsh Red kites in Ireland and Northern Ireland—update 2017

History

Red kite became extinct across the whole of Ireland for the same reason as in Britain: intense persecution due to game-keeping interests. All the criteria for a re-introduction programme were met as they were in England and Scotland and it was decided to use Welsh-born kites as a source due to the similarity in climate and the robust growth of the Welsh kite population. Two re-introduction schemes were initiated; in Ireland 158 kites were released at two sites between 2007 and 2011, and in Northern Ireland, 80 were released between 2008 and 2010. All the released birds were fitted with wing tags to help monitor the breeding population, and some were fitted with tracking devices. The released birds were all taken from nests within the core part of the welsh breeding range that had more than one nestling present at c. 4 weeks old. It had been calculated that the effect on the welsh population would be negligible.

Results

In Ireland the first two breeding attempts took place in 2009 but both of these failed to hatch eggs for unknown reasons. In 2010, ten young fledged from ten nests that were located, and two more fledged from at least one undiscovered nest bringing the total fledging that year to 12. This was the first successful breeding in the country for at least 200 years. The following year 17 chicks fledged, and by 2012 at least 17 nests produced a total of 23 chicks, including the first instance of young fledging from Irish-born kites. By 2015 the Irish breeding population had reached 53 pairs spread across three counties, and the in 2017 the population is estimated to be 70-80 breeding pairs.

In Northern Ireland the first breeding took place in 2010 by birds released in 2008. Four pairs fledged a total of five chicks, the first successful breeding in NI for over 200 years. The number of pairs increased to seven the following year and then to 11 in 2012, when 15 young were reared in total. The most recent surveys reveal that 20 pairs fledged 28 chicks in 2017.

Any Problems?

Of the 158 released Welsh-reared birds released in Ireland, 31 have been found dead, at least 23 of which had been poisoned and one of which was shot. Additionally, several Irish-born birds have suffered a similar fate. The use of indiscriminate poison baits to control corvids and foxes did not become illegal in Ireland until 2010, though the use of meat baits was banned slightly earlier in 2008. Rodenticide poisoning is part of the issue, and although their use is not necessarily illegal, the poisons stand a much higher chance of entering the food chain when guidelines of their correct use are not followed. More information and detailed reports of poisoning incidents are provided on the National Parks and Wildlife Service website. The latest report can be viewed by following this link. It is not just red kite that is affected; both golden eagle and white-tailed sea-eagles have also been recorded dead due to illegal poisoning.

In Northern Ireland the use of poison baits was made illegal in 1991, at the same time as it became law in England and Wales. Nonetheless, there have also been similar incidents, and a campaign supported by RSPB aims to raise awareness of the issue and reduce the number of incidents of both illegal and accidental poisoning.

It is worth noting that in Wales during the 1970's and 1980's, a similar problem existed and it could easily be argued that mortality due to poisoning of full-grown kites was the most significant reason preventing significant population recovery at the time.

Productivity in both areas seems to be good, with bad weather being the main cause of nest failures, as it is here in Wales.

The Future

Both the Irish and Northern Irish kite populations are likely to continue to increase in number and distribution and red kite is likely to become a widespread and common species in the long-term. All those involved with the species' conservation are working very hard to overcome any problems, and in doing so will improve the prospects of several other raptor species, including the two eagle species. If you ever venture across the Irish Sea and see a kite fly overhead, remember to tip your hat and show respect to an old friend, or offspring thereof.

WEBSITE

The new website is now the focal point for reporting our activities and publicity.

The web address is: **www.welshkitetrust.wales**.

(Please take care to use the ".wales" extension because the old extension of ".org" is now owned by someone that is nothing to do with the Trust).

On the website you will find details of the latest work of the Trust, information about kites and other raptors, links to related sites, a blog and much more. New posts will be added throughout the season and the site will improve and expand over time.

We will still produce a short newsletter once a year that will summarise the recent work of the Trust. This will be free to download, or can be sent be email if preferred.

We very much encourage any contact with the trust to take place online.

This can be done in two ways:

By using the contact form found on the 'CONTACT US' page on the website or

By email to: **admin@welshkitetrust.wales**, (again please note the .wales extension).

If you do not have online facilities then we can be contacted by post at:

John Roberts, Hirfryn, Maindy Croft, TonPentre, Pentre, Rhondda Cynon Taff, CF41 7ET.

We no longer have the facility to routinely answer questions by telephone.

IN BRIEF

Welsh Kite Trust Projects 2017

- 180 red kite nests monitored
- Further kestrel monitoring across Wales, 53 new col-rings added, 15 nests monitored.
- Further development of the website

In 2018 Welsh Kite Trust will be:

- Continuing with the primary objective of monitoring kite nests. The aim is to have a minimum sample of 100, and more if possible, including nests within the core breeding area and near the edge of the range so that the figures can be treated as representative.
- Expanding the kestrel colour-ringing programme, trialling a method of catching and marking adults so that adult survival can be measured. It is likely that adults are site-faithful between years, and if this is the case, then it will be possible to monitor their survival.
- Appealing for kestrel nest sites to add to the colour-ringing programme. Until juvenile dispersal patterns are better understood, it will be very difficult to decide appropriate conservation measures.
- Help fund a detailed merlin survey of Mid-Wales in conjunction with Ecology Matters Trust.
- Continue the process of digitising all our early nest records so that the data can be entered into the new BTO nest record scheme (DeMon).
- Begin two new colour-ringing programmes for merlin and goshawk

Please accept our grateful thanks for all your support.