

Red and Black Kites

Or rather, Red Kites and Black Kites – the former now common around Turvey with two or three pairs within a mile of the Abbey, and others nearby. The latter hasn't so far been recorded locally but it might be worth considering as a potential breeder and as a vagrant, which can readily cause confusion with young and adult female Marsh Harriers. These are definitely on the increase in Britain, and now regular in Bedfordshire on their way to and from their breeding grounds in East Anglia.

So I'll begin with two Marsh Harrier sightings here in 2014, one in the spring and the other in the autumn. My first at the Abbey was seen flying north on May 4th being mobbed by a Red Kite which appeared huge in comparison. The Marsh Harrier was a classic female in very dark brown plumage with a bright straw-coloured forehead and throat. Apart from occasional side-steps to avoid the Red Kite, it flew steadily northwards given away also by its more slender build and long dark tail. It also held its wings in a characteristic shallow 'v' when it had the chance to occasionally glide.



The Marsh Harrier sighting in the autumn was more problematic as it was probably a juvenile without any distinguishing pale head, and was a deep chocolate brown all over, recalling Black Kite. It passed low over Elderswell on 21st September again heading north. I've now had the chance to double check this with a recent trip to the Bassin d'Archachon



near Bordeaux where Black Kites are the commonest bird of prey. They are much more variegated than the name implies, showing a mix of pale brown patches in the wings both above and below. They also show slightly forked tails most of the time and, like the Red Kite, hold their wings quite differently from Marsh Harriers, presenting a drooping profile from head on rather than a shallow 'v'.

These birds were clearly quite at home in town as well as over the extensive pine forests of Les Landes and the dunes and marshes of the coast. They were a regular visitor over the garden often only at roof-top level. Like the Red Kite, they are mainly eaters of carrion but will also chase other birds of prey such as Sparrowhawks and Kestrels to make them drop their prey or even to snatch it from their claws.



Red Kites are now abundant in southern England since their reintroduction in 1989 and first successful breeding here in 1992. Black Kites remain rare and come to us mainly in spring as they head north from their Southern European and African wintering grounds and overshoot their breeding grounds in France. These now extend as far north as Caen and, like their sister kite the Red, Black Kites are still increasing.

So, it's worth keeping eyes peeled for another Kite in our skies, but beware also of those also rapidly increasing numbers of juvenile Marsh Harriers. We may have to wait a little longer for the Short-toed Eagles, Bluethroats, Bonelli's Warblers and Hoopoes also characteristic of Les Landes but global warming could well see to that as our gardens move south at the rate of several kilometres per year..

