

# Species occurring irregularly in Britain & Ireland

In this field guide we have focused on the raptors that breed regularly in Britain and Ireland. A number of other species occur less regularly and/or do not breed; five of these occur sufficiently regularly to merit inclusion of some brief notes on survey methods.

## **Black kite (*Milvus migrans*)**

In April 2005, an adult black kite was located on the Black Isle, Scotland, interacting with red kites. It was sexed as a male on the basis of its behaviour, and during May was recorded nest building in the company of an untagged female red kite. This breeding attempt failed before eggs were laid, and the black kite was last seen in early August. In April 2006, the black kite was back at the same location, apparently holding territory and paired with a 6-year old wing-tagged female red kite. Their nest, containing two young, was found in late June and both fledged in mid-July. This appears to be the first successful breeding of a wild black kite in Britain and Ireland. For locating nesting territories and nests of this species, the methodology given for red kite can be used as a guide. Hybridisation between red and black kites has been recorded elsewhere in Europe (Wobus & Creutz, 1970; Sylven, 1977).

## **Pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*)**

In 1995, a male pallid harrier bred with a female hen harrier on Orkney; the eggs were thought to have been predated, probably by hooded crows (Betts, 2007). For locating nesting territories and nests of this species, the methodology given for hen harrier should be used as a guide.

## **Rough-legged buzzard (*Buteo lagopus*)**

Rough-legged buzzards are winter visitors to Britain and Ireland. They arrive from October onwards and normally leave by late March or April, with the occasional bird staying into June. Rough-legged buzzards can arrive in large numbers (Cramp & Simmons, 1980) in years when rodents are scarce in their breeding grounds in northern Europe (Scott, 1968).

Rough-legged buzzards occupy winter home ranges. In France, these ranges were associated with open habitats with abundant vole populations (Baker & Brooks, 1981; Michelat & Giraudoux, 1999). Winter home ranges in Scotland are found in lowland farmland with a mixture of woodland and open fields with patches of rough ground, in heather moorland, or in open woodland bordering hill ground. All of these habitats have large open areas that can support high density vole populations. Winter home ranges may be held by a pair of birds that roost together (Cramp & Simmons, 1980).

Fieldworkers identifying wintering rough-legged buzzards should report them to their Local Bird Recorder, giving a full description and location (six figure (or more) map reference). Winter home ranges can be determined by recording the location of the buzzards on repeat visits to the wintering area.

## **Gyr falcon (*Falco rusticolus*)**

The gyrfalcon (gyrfalcon) is an occasional winter visitor to Britain and Ireland. They can occupy temporary home ranges in suitable habitats (Breider, 1996; Cade *et al.*, 1998). Wintering gyrfalcons in northeast Scotland have been observed to remain in the same area for several weeks, occupying either mountain or estuarine habitats. These birds have included both white and grey phase falcons. Some gyrfalcons are transitory and do not occupy a home range. Gyrfalcons taken into care after being caught on oil rigs have been released in Aberdeenshire, but none of these birds appeared to remain in the area. It is believed that many of the birds wintering in Britain are from the Arctic but there is a possibility that captive gyrfalcons, or hybrids resembling pure gyrfalcons, may have escaped.

Most adult gyrfalcons do not leave their nesting territories in the winter (Poole & Bromley, 1988; Nielson & Cade, 1990). Juveniles, sub-adults and some adults disperse to wintering areas from August to April and may move over large distances. Different populations depend on ptarmigan or collared lemmings (both of which have cycling populations) as their principal prey. In years of low prey abundance, the gyrfalcons may be forced to leave their normal wintering areas, when they are more likely to be seen in Britain.

Fieldworkers locating wintering gyrfalcons should send details of the location(s) and a description of the bird to their Local Bird Recorder. Once again, the existence of a winter home range can be assessed by making repeated visits to the area where the bird is first sighted, to determine whether it is still resident.

## **Eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*)**

It is uncertain whether the eagle owl (Eurasian eagle-owl) is native to Britain and Ireland or whether the sightings and breeding attempts that have been recorded involve individuals which escaped from captivity (Dennis, 2005). Given recent increases in continental European eagle owl populations, there is a possibility that wild vagrants may occur if they have not already done so. There is however, no evidence that the eagle owls breeding in Britain are of natural occurrence or have formed a self-sustaining population (Melling *et al.*, 2008), and this species has not been added to the British list.

A pair of eagle owls has bred successfully in northern England since 1996, rearing a total of 23 young (Dennis, 2005), one of which was found dead in Shropshire, over 200 km away. Between 1–2 breeding attempts have also been reported from northeast Scotland between 1984 and 1994, and a male eagle owl has recently been recorded calling from another area of northern Scotland.

Eagle owls occupy their home range throughout the year. They defend their nesting territory but the home ranges of adjacent pairs overlap. They can be censused by a combination of listening for and locating spontaneous calls from breeding birds, broadcasting calls and listening for responses, and checking suitable nesting habitat (Penteriani & Pinchera, 1990); listening for the adult owls' calls was found to be the most effective method. In Spain, calling occurs from autumn to spring, and the owls are most vocal in January and February (Ruiz-Martínez *et al.*, 1996). The young will call when they are over five weeks old, most frequently in the three hours

before sunset and after sunrise (Penteriani *et al.*, 2000), which provides a useful cue for locating successful nests. Eagle owls tend to occupy areas that are remote from human settlements; they require a reliable supply of large prey and secure nesting and roosting sites (Cramp & Simmons, 1980). They breed in the old nests of other large birds, on ledges on crags, in holes or cracks in rock-faces, in large tree holes, and on the ground. In northern Europe, eagle owls can lay eggs from March to early May (Mikkola, 1983), with the young fledging three months later. Eagle owls are very sensitive to disturbance and may desert eggs or small young (Mikkola, 1983).

Fieldworkers finding eagle owls should proceed with caution, as the birds are prone to desert, are large and can be aggressive. Breeding attempts should be reported to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel and/or the Local Bird Recorder, and also to staff of the appropriate Statutory Nature Conservation Agency (see Appendix 2).

