

Buzzard comeback

Numbers continue to soar



Buzzard. – David Dillon



Buzzard. – Shay Connolly

John Lusby reports

The success of the Buzzard is a heartening respite from the frequent accounts of declining bird populations. Driven to extinction in Ireland by the early part of the 20th century, the Buzzard's natural re-colonisation after a significant absence is testament to the adaptability of the species. The population recovery is continuing, with an expanding range and increasing numbers. However, the issues responsible for the Buzzard's initial disappearance from Ireland have unfortunately not completely disappeared.



to the point of extinction. Reintroduction projects have been established for these three species. However, this has not been necessary for Buzzards, which have successfully returned on their own.

Re-colonisation

The first re-colonisation was recorded in the 1930s, with movements of Scottish Buzzards to Northern Ireland. These birds initially settled on Rathlin Island in Co Antrim, where breeding was confirmed in 1933. The breeding population slowly increased, with an estimated 10-15 breeding pairs in Antrim by the 1950s. This attempted re-colonisation ultimately failed, however, as Myxomatosis then dramatically reduced Rabbit numbers and deprived Buzzards of their main prey. The Irish population was once again extinct by the mid-1960s. However, another wave of re-colonisation from Scotland soon

History

In certain parts of Ireland a sighting of a Buzzard, soaring on broad wings or hanging in the wind on updrafts, is now becoming commonplace. Their loud "mewing" vocalisations nowadays blend naturally with the chorus of other bird calls in the spring. But the ease with which they fit into the landscape today also means that we can easily forget that they were completely wiped out in Ireland only a few generations ago.

Historically, Buzzards are likely to have been widespread and relatively abundant throughout Ireland, similar to their current status in Great Britain where they are the most common bird of prey. During the 19th century, however, serious population declines were evident in Ireland. By the middle of the 19th century, the remnants of a much reduced breeding population survived only in counties Antrim, Donegal and Down, with the Irish population thought to have eventually disappeared by the late 1890s. During this period, persecution of birds of prey was intensive, and Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and Red Kite populations also suffered

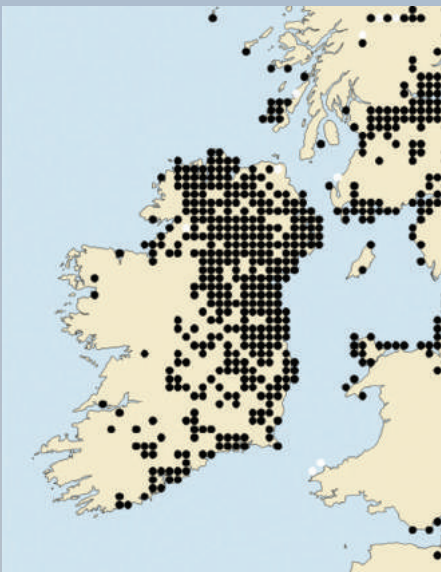


Young Buzzard (note pale grey eyes).

– Elmeear Rooney

ensued and the first Breeding Birds Atlas (1968-1972) confirmed pairs to be once again established in Antrim, Donegal and Down.

The Buzzard population in Northern Ireland and in Donegal increased steadily through the 1970s and '80s. However, movement further south did not progress with the same pace. This could be partly due to the poison substance strychnine, which was widely used at the time on meat baits to control foxes and corvids in the Republic of Ireland. As Buzzards are opportunistic and include carrion in their diet they are particularly susceptible to poisoned carcasses. Strychnine has been banned under UK legislation for a long time; however, its use in the Republic of Ireland was only prohibited in 1991. This ban on strychnine undoubtedly had a positive effect on the Buzzard population and facilitated their return to areas in Ireland where they had not been present for over 100 years.



Buzzard breeding range change between 1970 and 2010. Black dots represent gains and white spots represent losses. Source: BTO Bird Atlas database.

Range increase

In more recent years the Buzzard's spread has gained momentum, and numbers have also been supplemented by birds arriving on our east coast from Wales. Along with the colonisation and expansion of Little Egrets and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, the Buzzard's success story is one of the most positive in recent Irish ornithological history and among the most well-known among Irish birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts. Preliminary results from the current Breeding Birds Atlas (2007-2011) reveal the dramatic extent to which the Buzzard has bounced back. To date the Atlas has received breeding season records of Buzzards from every county, with the exception of Co Kerry. Breeding has been confirmed in 16 counties, with probable breeding recorded in a further five counties.

The Buzzard population is showing the greatest increases in distribution and abundance of any bird species recorded by the Breeding Birds Atlas in Ireland over the past 30 years. The conservation

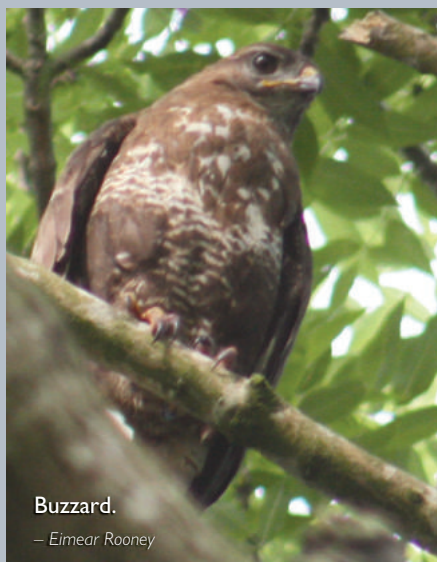
Eimear Rooney of Queens University Belfast examines a brood of six young Buzzards.

— Robert Straughan



prospects for Irish Buzzards are generally considered to be optimistic, but their future outlook is not without its threats.

Buzzards are still a rare sight in certain areas of the



Buzzard.

— Eimear Rooney

country, particularly in western counties where re-colonisation has been significantly slower compared with the north and east. While the Atlas has provided important insights on movements and rates of re-colonisation, the reasons why Buzzards have been slow to gain a foothold in certain areas are not fully understood. The majority of the population currently resides to the east of a line drawn between Sligo and Cork. Buzzards have not yet become properly established in areas such as west Galway and Kerry, which are considered to offer prime habitat for Buzzards and which should, in theory, hold good densities.

Threats

As top predators, Buzzards are excellent sentinels of the wellbeing of the environment. Their presence in an area should be viewed as a positive indication of a healthy countryside, as well as a benefit to local agriculture. Their re-colonisation has restored a natural balance, filling a vital ecological niche which has been empty for decades. By feeding readily on carrion, and through direct predation, Buzzards help



Buzzard.

– Shay Connolly

How you can help

The current Bird Atlas (2007-2011) would benefit from your input. Please help to monitor the distribution and range increase of the Buzzard by reporting any sightings to: www.birdatlas.net.

We would also greatly appreciate your assistance in monitoring the impacts of illegal poisoning and other forms of persecution on Buzzards and other raptor populations. You can assist this important work by reporting any raptor carcasses found, or any suspicious incidents regarding the misuse of poisons, to John Lusby, Raptor Conservation Officer, at jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie.

to keep numbers of corvids (which are considered pests) such as Hooded Crows and Magpies in check. However, despite this, a small minority still view the Buzzard's presence in a negative light.

Certain factors which impact on the Buzzard population in Ireland have served to highlight darker issues prevailing in country life. Unfortunately, illegal persecution, such as the use of poison meat baits, still exists in Ireland. The efforts by the Golden Eagle Trust to reintroduce Golden Eagles, White-tailed Eagles and Red Kites have been seriously hampered by incidents of illegal poisoning. In recent years BirdWatch Ireland has received numerous reports of suspected poisoning of Buzzards from many parts of the country. Testing of Buzzard carcasses has been carried out, where possible (with the help of the Regional Veterinary Laboratory of the Department of Agriculture in Cork and the Central Laboratory at Backweston, in Celbridge, Co Kildare), and the results have confirmed poisoning to be a serious threat, not only to the Buzzard population but also to a host of other birds and mammals.

In 2008, the Department of Agriculture, in line

with an EU decision, prohibited the use of the substance Alphachloralose as a means of controlling foxes and crows. In October 2010, the legislation regarding the use of poisons in Ireland was further amended to afford greater protection to wildlife. It is now illegal to use any poison to kill birds or animals (with the exception of rats and mice). However, in order for these laws to be effective, issues of awareness and enforcement also need to be addressed, and it remains to be seen how beneficial the legislation will prove for Buzzards and other birds of prey. To date, the government has not established a formal monitoring protocol, and this is also essential in order to understand the full effect that poisoning is having on our wildlife.

Research

These issues affecting the expanding Buzzard population, their population dynamics and their position at the top of the food chain make them a fascinating and relevant species to research. The most comprehensive study is being undertaken by Eimear Rooney, a PhD student at Queens University

in Belfast (funded by the Department for Employment and Learning). Her work has shown that the diet of the Buzzard in Northern Ireland varies considerably from what has been found in other parts of its European range. Due to the comparatively limited diversity of small mammals in Ireland, Buzzards in Northern Ireland rely to a much greater extent on medium-sized birds such as corvids, and also on Rabbits.

The research findings in relation to breeding performance have also produced very interesting results. Although the average fledging success recorded in Northern Ireland is slightly lower than that of the UK, one particular nest monitored by Eimear has an impressive success rate. This nest fledged five chicks in 2009, with a phenomenal six fledging in 2010! This amazing record proves that under the right conditions Buzzards can once again thrive on this island.

John Lusby is BirdWatch Ireland's Raptor Conservation Officer.



Buzzard.

– David Dillon

Red Kite. This species can sometimes be confused with Buzzard. Note the long forked tail, exceptionally wide wingspan and rusty colours.

– Shay Connolly

