

**Species spotlight: Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*) and Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo buteo*)**

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Common buzzard photo by Bruce Kendrick - Note the short fanned tail



Red kites and common buzzards are two of England's largest and most beautiful birds of prey. With the wing spans of buzzards being up to 54 inches and red kites up to 70 inches!

Common buzzards are the most common raptor in the British Isles but it's not always been this way. The buzzard, 20 years ago, was confined to north western Britain and a few areas in the far south west of England and at this point their population was very low due to intense hunting. It wasn't until the mid 90's until they started really spreading east, and they have amazingly now become our most common bird of prey. This species is finally turning up here in Bexley in some numbers and over the past few years more and

more of these amazing animals are being spotted. I saw an adult myself late last year (2015) in Footh Cray Meadows.

Red kites are such majestic looking colourful raptors. However, just like buzzards they have had a hard time of it being ruthlessly hunted by game farmers. Red kites were on the brink of extinction and by the end of the 1800's red kites were locally extinct from both the entirety of England and Scotland and the last small remaining populations existed in the most untouched wooded valley of Wales. The population was so low that these animals (many, many years later) were given a second chance by being introduced back into a few areas of England and Scotland.

Red kite – Note the forked tail and pale grey head

Once protected, these birds started to thrive and now many years later are back in force across the UK. Red kites are spreading further south too and can now be seen here in Bexley and like the buzzard could potentially be a future breeding bird here.

Red kites and buzzards can turn up at just about any of Bexley's wild areas. However

some sites seem to have attracted them more than others. Red kites and buzzards can be spotted along the Thames particularly at Erith and Crayford marshes. Although, inland along the rivers Cray and Shuttle seems to be another hot spot with both buzzards and red kites being spotted at various sites along its banks at Hall Place, Foots Cray Meadows and Bexley Park Woods.

Kites and buzzards can be hard to tell apart especially when they are flying high. They are both large birds and both often fly in circles. With both species becoming increasingly common in Bexley it's useful to be able to identify them. Seen close up both species can be told apart easily. The red kite has an unmistakable intense orange red colouration with a pale grey head and the buzzard a deep brown colour with a splatter of white on its chest and under its wings. Red kites are more slender than the broad winged thick set buzzard and also have a longer wing span. However the main way to distinguish the species (apart from the colour) is the animal's tail. The buzzard has a short broad fanned tail whilst the red kite has a very distinctive long forked tail. If the animals are too far away to distinguish, look at the animal's behaviour as buzzards flap their wings far more often to stay in flight than kites do. Red kites will soar and only occasionally flap their wings to stay aloft.



Common buzzard & red kite – Note the difference in head colour



A beautiful adult common buzzard photographed at Bexley's own Hall Place in Crayford. This species is more known for flying in circles high in the sky although they will come down to open areas such as lawns to feed on worms. Photo by Donna Zimmer

The reason for this guide is because of the population trends of both species. Both buzzards and red kites are becoming more common and spreading further east toward Bexley, that's why it's no surprise that already in 2016 'Bexley Wildlife' has received reports of both species in the borough. We hope (with the current trends in the population) that both species will become a frequent sight across Bexley. If you have spotted or photographed any red kites or buzzards anywhere in Bexley please let us know. I hope this guide has helped and please tell us if you see either of these species across Bexley.

Unless otherwise stated, photography was supplied by the brilliant wildlife photographers: Bruce Kendrick and Moi Hicks.

Joseph Johnson