

Population Trends of the Red Kite *Milvus milvus* in Italy

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ABSTRACT

The Red Kite was a common species in most of Italy in the late 19th century. A sharp decline occurred thereafter, leading to a contraction of its range. The Red Kite can at present be found in southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia. Its island populations are currently undergoing a dramatic decline. Recovery is being observed in the northern part of the present area of distribution. Shooting and road construction are identified as the main causes of the current decline.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of the effort of a study group to outline the past and present trends of the Red Kite populations in Italy. Besides a review of the literature, data were obtained from members of the Italian Committee for the Protection of Birds of Prey (CIPR) and the Italian League for Protection of Birds (LIPU), dispersed throughout central and southern Italy over a number of years. The regional data were provided by: M. Pellegrini (Abruzzi), G. Battista (Molise), A. Minganti, F. Riga, A. Zocchi (Latium), M. Rocco (Campania), A. Sigismondi (Apulia & Basilicata), P. Cortone (Calabria), A. Campo and M. Sarà (Sicily). The aim of the survey is to identify key areas for the survival of residual populations and introduction of fresh stocks.

METHODS

All available literature regarding the Red Kite in Italy was reviewed in order to define its distribution in the past. It has to be remembered that data up to the 1980s are scarce and general, so that only a rough figure of the situation can be given.

For the last two decades data are more reliable, thanks to field researches carried out by the study group; nevertheless the suitable habitats are not evenly covered, given the huge area and lack of sufficient observers. For some few areas only hypothetical values are therefore given.

RESULTS

Historical background

Map 1 shows the present and past distribution of the Red Kite in Italy. Dates represent the last breeding records found in the literature. From these data it is clear that the Red Kite was once a

common species, widespread in suitable habitats from north-western Italy, down the Tyrrhenian side of the peninsula and throughout southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia (Savi 1827). It was also found in some areas on the Adriatic side, but scarcer and more localized (Gasparini 1894).

At the end of the last century the species was already declining on mainland Italy. Some authors even reported this trend a good deal earlier. The species was extinct in the north by the beginning of the 20th century.

This decline spread southwards, leading to the extinction of the Red Kite population in Tuscany, where it was formerly said to be very common. The last breeding records in this area date from between 1900 and 1930 (Arrigoni degli Oddi 1929).

In central and southern Italy (Southern Latium, Abruzzi, Molise, Gargano promontory, Calabria) it was still a characteristic feature of the countryside until the 1950s. Between the 1960s and '70s the number of breeding pairs suddenly fell and the range of distribution contracted, leading to the disappearance of many marginal pairs.

In those years some small, scattered populations could still be found within the former range; for example, breeding pairs were observed near Varese (Bianchi *et al.* 1973) and Ravenna (Garavini 1950) in the 1950s and '60s, but to-day they are gone.

The Red Kite was still common in Sicily and Sardinia up to the 1970s. A severe decline has been reported in the 1980s for Sicily (Falcone 1985) and some years earlier for Sardinia (Schenk 1976). In Sicily the decline has been the most dramatic ever recorded in Italy. Up to the late 1970s the breeding population was estimated at 100-150 pairs. Only 10-12 are to-day left in the northern part of the island.

Shooting and poaching can be considered the most relevant causes of this decline. Recent comments on the phenomenon in southern and insular Italy suggest that massive funding, from both European and national institutions, is leading to the widespread development of roads, often useless and speculative, in the less developed areas. This in turn allows an ever-increasing section of the public to reach these areas and kill wildlife. In southern Italy the Red Kite is considered a nice bird to have stuffed, and it is killed whenever possible. The species is known to frequent rubbish dumps near villages, and in several instances poachers have been seen hiding near such sites in order to shoot kites. The Red Kite is a resident species in Italy and therefore specially affected by the winter hunting season. Its habit of frequenting rubbish dumps exposes it to the danger of being poisoned, both deliberately and through the presence of toxic waste.

Other evident causes of decrease are poisoned baits, specially in Sardinia, and the environmental changes which have affected most of the nation. One of the limiting factors in Latium is, for example, the shortage of mature woods, which forces the kite to breed on small and insecure trees. In at least one case the chick was found dead after collapse of the nest (Minganti & Panella, 1991). Moreover nests built on small trees are more easily robbed.

A similar decrease affected the wintering population. Historical data on the distribution and numbers of winter communal roosts are very scarce. In south-eastern Sicily at least 50-60 Red Kites were recorded at winter roosts until the 1970s, but not since. In the northern part of the same island two roosts with a total of 150 kites observed up to the late 1970s are nowadays reduced to only 25-50 (M. Sarà, pers. comm.).

Present status

In 1990-92 the total number of breeding pairs in Italy was between 130 and 170.

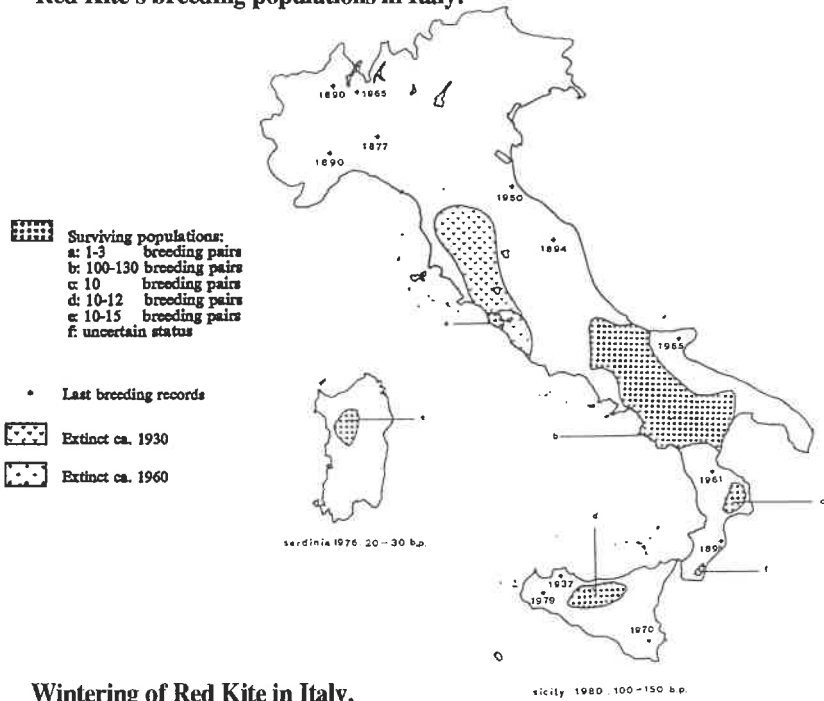
The bulk of the breeding population (100-130 pairs) is distributed in suitable habitats in central and southern Italy. Two other still used breeding areas are found in Calabria (nearly 10 pairs) and Sicily (10-12 pairs). In Sardinia the figure was 20-30 pairs in 1990 (Schenk, pers. comm.). Records overall suggest a dramatic decline in recent years that has led the species to the brink of extinction. Isolated relic populations exist in Latium (1-3 pairs) and Calabria, where some pairs are said to survive in the extreme south.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

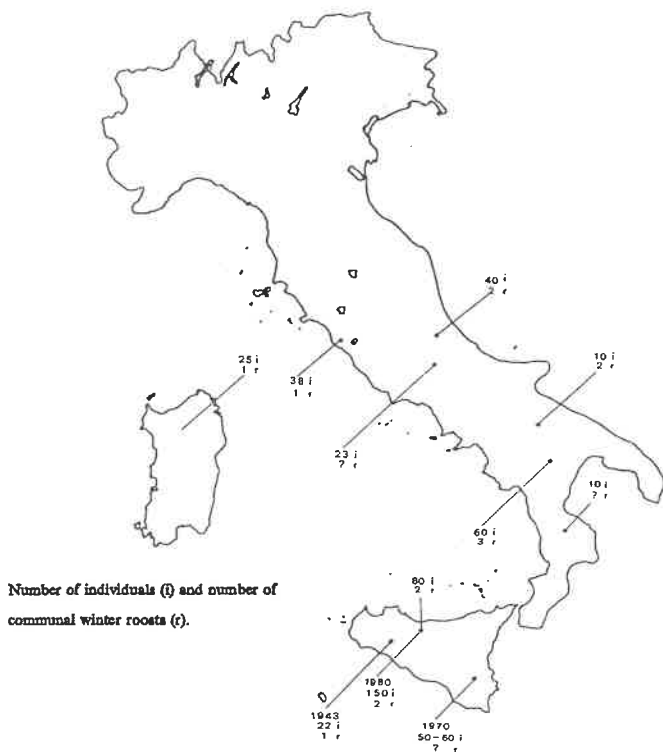
Negative trends

The Red Kite is still decreasing in large portions of the country, especially in the south, where socio-economic conditions have led recently to an increase in road building, with its related problems. Shooting and poaching are widely practised in those areas and controls are

Map 1. Red Kite's breeding populations in Italy.



Map 2. Wintering of Red Kite in Italy.



very weak. It must not be forgotten that a strong cultural tradition impels hundreds of people to poach Honey Buzzards and other large birds crossing over the Straits of Messina every year during the spring migration.

The general trend seems to be one of severe decline followed in certain areas by a recovery (see following section). This decline occurred first in the north of Italy, steadily spreading in more recent years towards the south. In the extreme south it is still continuing to-day.

Positive trends

In a few areas the Red Kite is slowly recovering after being brought almost to extinction. Due to the improvement of protected areas (Abruzzi) and to wide information campaigns (Molise) addressed to key groups of the public (mostly hunters) it has recently begun to show signs of increase. The findings of the members of the study group suggest that hunting is the major limiting factor and that an improvement in controls and education is the best means of aiding its recovery. Thus the Red Kite is expanding its distribution in the northern part of its range (Manzi *et al.* 1991). Even the set-aside policy recently applied by the European Community has been claimed as another relevant factor in its recovery.

Conservation and management

From the above picture some useful suggestions can be put forward.

Further research is needed to evaluate the trends of the population on a concrete basis.

The establishing of protected areas and enforcement of controls over hunting and poaching are the top priorities if the species is to be maintained. The Red Kite is nevertheless a difficult species to protect, due to its great mobility.

Feeding places are currently established by CIPR members during winter for counts of wintering kites (which are nevertheless best carried out at the roosting sites) and in order to simplify the search for food and thereby diminish winter mortality caused by hunters (Catullo *et al.* in press). Feeding places are also generally regarded as a useful means of increasing the productivity of breeding pairs and are therefore set out to help the surviving pairs in Latium, Calabria and Sicily.

Education of key groups of the public, such as hunters and farmers, has locally proved to be effective. Efforts to make people aware of the importance of birds of prey are costly but a rewarding element in their conservation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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