

ISLINGTON U3A – BIRD WATCHING GROUP

PREYING (Birds of Prey)

May be you struggle to tell the difference between birds of prey. This is often as they are seen for afar or are moving quickly. But there some key features that can help you distinguish between the more common (in the South of England) sightings of these birds. We'll only consider here:

- Kites
- Buzzards
- Falcons
- Harriers
- Kestrels
- Hobbys

You are most likely in the SE of England to see Kites & buzzards compared to the others listed above. However, strangely, in our iU3A Bird Watching visits w have recorded spotting more Kestrels and Peregrine Falcons than Kites or Buzzards.

Here is some information about each to help spot and tell the difference between them:

KITES

There are a few types of kite but for the South of England it's going to be red kites. In other parts of the UK and certainly abroad (Europe & beyond) you can see black kites. In Africa you'll see yellow beaked kites. But for us here it will be a red kite. In England, red kites have been re-introduced to four areas since 1989: the Chilterns, East Midlands, Yorkshire and north-east England. The first birds were brought from Spain, but as the Chilterns population grew quickly it produced enough young birds to donate small numbers to establish populations in the other areas. The final project, Northern Kites near Gateshead in north-east England, began in 2004.

So that's the first clue – is it reddish brownish all over? Is it quite big? Size can be difficult to judge in the sky but if you look at the size info you can see that for us in the SE we are not going to be seeing the very big birds of prey (eg Osprey's, Eagles). So it's only the medium size (kites, buzzards) that we are going to be seeing or the smaller group (eg falcons, harriers, kestrels, hobbys). To tell the difference between a kite & a buzzard look at the tail. Is it a sharp V outline or more of a fan shape? A sharp V means it's a kite. You can see kites all year round.

The last clue is sound, it's call is quite distinctive – but similar to that of a Buzzard. Click on the link below.

UK breeding: 1,600 pairs

Size: Length: 60-66cm, Wingspan: 175-195cm

Audio Link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/410417>

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/safeguarding-species/case-studies/red-kite/#edVXQVyKPU5sflp5.99>



BUZZARD

Now the commonest and most widespread UK bird of prey. The buzzard is medium size with broad, rounded wings, and a short neck and tail. When gliding and soaring it will often hold its wings in a shallow 'V' and the tail is fanned. Birds are variable in colour from all dark brown to much paler variations, all have dark wingtips and a finely barred tail. Their plaintive mewling call could be mistaken for a cat.

Look for birds soaring over wooded hillsides in fine weather, or perched on fence posts and pylons. In some areas they are known as the tourists' eagle, often being mistaken for this larger bird of prey.

You can see buzzards all year round.

UK breeding: 57,000-79,000 pairs

Size: Length: 51-57cm; Wingspan: 113-128cm

Audio Link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/409241>

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/buzzard/#bEasisBWhpC5ZBRe.99>



FALCONS - PEREGRINE

There are quite a few types of falcons but the one we are most likely to spot is a peregrine falcon.



It has long, broad, pointed wings and a relatively short tail. It is blue-grey above, with a blackish top of the head and an obvious black 'moustache' that contrasts with its white face. Its breast is finely barred. It is swift and agile in flight, chasing prey. Peregrines can be confused with Hobbys or Sparrowhawks.

Peregrines were at a low point in the 1960s due to human persecution and the impact of pesticides in the food chain. Improved legislation and protection has helped the birds to recover and they have now expanded into many urban areas. We've seen them at Walthamstow Marshes and on Tate Modern (or nesting in the Barbican). In Winter you should see them easily on east coast marshes. You can see peregrines all year round.

Peregrines are a Schedule 1 listed species of The Wildlife and Countryside Act.

UK breeding: 1,500 pairs

Length: 39-50 cm, Wingspan: 95-115 cm, Weight: 600-1300 g

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/peregrine/#xyEPGxVSGRtGKuhB.99>

Audio link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/347555>

HARRIERS

There are two main types of harrier that we could spot in the SE of England – marsh or hen. We've seen both at Rainham marshes.

HEN HARRIER - of the UK's birds of prey this is the most intensively persecuted. The conflict and threat to its survival in some parts of the UK, is on the driven grouse moors, and hence with gamekeepers. They are listed as a Schedule 1 species under The Wildlife and Countryside Act.

While males are a pale grey colour, females and immatures are brown with a white rump and a long, barred tail which give them the name 'ringtail'. They fly with wings held in a shallow 'V', gliding low in search of food, which mainly consists of meadow pipits and voles. The Orkney population is famous for being polygynous, with males sometimes mating with multiple females on the island.



Hen harriers arrive back on upland breeding areas from late March and stay there until August and September. Away from breeding areas birds can be seen from October to March and continental birds will join residents in October and November.

Length: 44-52cm, Wingspan: 100-120cm, Weight: 300-400g (male) 400-600g (female)

Population: UK breeding 617 pairs (and 29 on the Isle of Man) in 2010

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/hen-harrier/#iwdQ62hdDxzEK1Ba.99>

Audio link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/341267>

MARSH HARRIER - the largest of the harriers, the marsh harrier can be recognised by its long tail and light flight with wings held in a shallow 'V'. It is distinguishable from other harriers by its larger size, heavier build, broader wings and absence of white on the rump. Females are larger than males and have obvious creamy heads.



Its future in the UK is now more secure than at any time during the last century, but historical declines and subsequent recovery means it is an Amber List species. Marsh harriers are a Schedule 1 listed bird on The Wildlife and Countryside Act. Marsh harriers are usually back in their breeding areas by April and leave during September and October, although a growing number - usually the females - are staying all year round.

Length: 48-56cm, Wingspan: 115-130cm, Weight: 400-660g (male); 540-800g (female)

Population: UK breeding 400 pairs

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/marsh-harrier/#KgRIQIXb6B72PBzO.99>

Audio link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/345760>

KESTREL

Kestrels are a familiar sight with their pointed wings and long tail, hovering beside a roadside verge. Numbers of kestrels declined in the 1970s, probably as a result of changes in farming and so it is included on the Amber List. They have adapted readily to man-made environments and can survive right in the centre of cities. So it's the hovering above a potential prey that is the give-away for spotting.



Kestrels are found in a wide variety of habitats, from moor and heath, to farmland and urban areas. The only places they do not favour are dense forests, vast treeless wetlands and mountains. They can often be seen perched on a high tree branch, or on a telephone post or wire, on the look out for prey. You can see kestrels all year round

Length: 32-35cm, Wingspan: 71-80cm, Weight: 156-252g

Population: UK breeding 46,000 pairs

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/kestrel/#TCgkEluMyIBLVpQd.99>

Audio link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/433468>

HOBBY

About the size of a kestrel with long pointed wings, reminiscent of a giant swift. It has a dashing flight and will chase large insects and small birds like swallows and martins. Prey is often caught in its talons and transferred to its beak in flight. Can accelerate rapidly in flight and is capable of high-speed aerial manoeuvres. Hobbies are listed as a Schedule 1 bird on The Wildlife and Countryside Act. One of the signs for hobbies is their sudden dives. Sweeping down on smaller birds or small land mammals. They don't hover like a kestrel but are constantly wheeling or diving.



They have orange-red legs. They have a medium-length bill with an orange base to match, brown speckled back and wings and paler belly. Hobbies arrive in the UK from April onwards and mainly leave in September and October. Best looked for on warm summer days when there are plenty of dragonflies, summer chafers and other prey around. Hobbies now breed across northern, central, southern and eastern England, southern Scotland and south Wales. Best looked for hunting over woodland and heathland, where there is plenty of large insect prey. Gravel pits are popular feeding areas in late summer when there is an abundance of food. Seen at Rainham and Two Tree Island.

Length: 28-36cm, Wingspan: 70-92cm, Weight: 131-340g

Population: UK breeding 2,800 pairs

Read more at <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/hobby/>

Audio link: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/384796>

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

If you've spotted a bird of prey around London but it doesn't seem to fit any of the above then other options are:

- Sparrowhawk
- Merlin