

Buzzard



Currently the most common and widespread bird of prey in the UK is the buzzard which may be seen in this area all year round. Although the greatest numbers occur in Scotland, Wales, the Lake District and south-west England, it is now breeding in every county. It occupies most habitats, particularly deciduous and coniferous woodland, moorland, scrub, pasture and arable farmland, and is frequently seen in villages, towns and cities. Look out for birds soaring as they scan open countryside, and perching on telegraph poles and fence posts from where they scour the ground for prey.

Hunting takes place over open land when buzzards search for small mammals, like voles and rabbits, and also birds, reptiles and amphibians, and will readily include carrion in their diet. When their main prey is in short supply, they may be seen walking over recently ploughed fields seeking out earthworms and large insects.

In flight this large raptor appears short-necked and to have a short, wide tail. Its broad wings end in finger-like feathers to reduce turbulence and so make flight more efficient. Buzzards measure about half a metre in length with an average wingspan of over a metre and a body weight of about 800 grams in males and a kilogram in females (about 1¾ to 2¼ lb). The plumage can vary in colour from almost pure white to black, but is typically shades of brown but all birds have dark wingtips and a finely barred tail. When gliding and soaring they often hold their wings in a shallow 'V' shape with the tail fanned.

They are fiercely territorial, and fights will occur if a bird strays onto another pair's territory, but dominant displays normally see off the interloper. To attract a mate (or impress his existing mate as pairs remain together for life) the male performs a ritual aerial display before the beginning of spring. This spectacular display is known as 'the roller coaster' and involves the male ascending high in the sky, turning and plummeting downwards in a spiral and then immediately repeating the manoeuvre.

Buzzards breed when they reach the age of three years and construct their nests in trees. The nest is usually made from twigs and lined with moss and bracken, and frequently the same nest is used year after year. A single clutch of two or three white eggs with brownish or purplish blotches is produced each year, and they are incubated for about five weeks, the male and female taking turns in the nest. Both adults feed the young birds, though the newly-hatched young are usually fed by the female with the male hunting and bringing food to the nest.

They are long-lived birds, averaging about 12 years although there is an authenticated record of one bird reaching over 25 years. Buzzard populations are now recovering, with the number of pairs breeding annually estimated as 60,000-80,000 pairs, after suffering a severe decline when myxomatosis decimated their major prey, the rabbit and so depleted their food source. Nowadays in our local area buzzards are plentiful and have become known as "tourists' eagles", as visitors, seeing them for the first time, often think they have seen a golden eagle.

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