



The Common Buzzard

Background

The common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) is a medium sized bird of prey, weighing between about 750g and 1.1 kg. It has a relatively large body, broad wings and a fan shaped tail. The plumage is highly variable, ranging from very dark brown to rarely, almost entirely white individuals. It is now found widely throughout the United Kingdom and Europe. Up until about 30 years ago the Scottish Population was largely restricted to western areas. However, recent population recovery has seen population expansions in lowland and eastern parts of the country.



Where are buzzards commonly found and how many are there?

In recent years, common buzzards have re-colonised most parts of mainland Scotland, with some remaining gaps in distribution, largely in eastern Scotland. The common buzzard is now likely to be the commonest raptor in Scotland. Common buzzards breed on most of the island groups, apart from part of Orkney and all of Shetland though further range expansion and in-filling of new breeding pairs can be expected. The recovery of this population has in part been driven by a reduction in illegal human killing in the lowlands, as well as the increase in rabbit populations, which are a key prey species. Nesting habitat, in the form of new woodlands and shelterbelts, has also provided good opportunities for common buzzards.

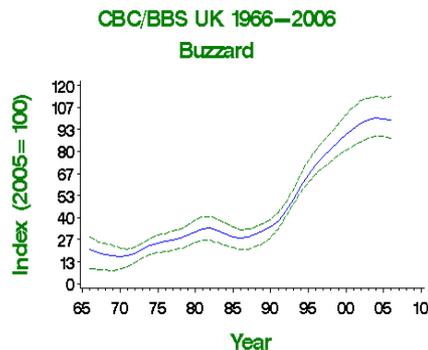
Common buzzards can breed at relatively high densities, especially in the lowlands and populations of over a pair per square kilometre in Scotland are not unusual where food supply and nest site availability is good. Buzzards are largely absent as a breeding species in the high montane areas. The Scottish population of common buzzards is estimated to be 15,000-20,000 breeding pairs compared to a British population of c44,000-61,000 breeding pairs.

Where and when do they breed?

It is likely that most common buzzards in Scotland will start breeding at three or more years of age. The main breeding period starts with display in March with eggs being laid in April and the young fledging in July, although these young birds will remain close to the nest site beyond that time. The average clutch size is 2.5 eggs per pair, and average brood size is about 2 young per pair (BTO, Bird Facts). Common buzzards are territorial and remain on territory all of the year, whereas immature,

non-breeding buzzards are more mobile and may move quite large distances, seeking vacant territories and reliable food supplies.

Population trends



Population trends from the BTO Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) suggest a significant UK increase of 56% in the common buzzard population between 1994 and 2007. In Scotland, the increase in the population over the same period has been 36%. The population recovery in Scotland is likely to have been at a lower rate of increase as common buzzards were already present in more parts of Scotland at the start of the reference period than in other part of the UK.

Are common buzzards protected?

All wild birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended by the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004). They do not receive the higher special level of schedule 1 protection afforded to most other native Scottish raptor species.

What do common buzzards eat?

The common buzzard has a wide-ranging diet, however it largely takes rabbits and other small mammals though birds may also be an important prey item at some nests. Carrion of dead animals may also form a significant part of the diet, with invertebrates (particularly in the winter). The hunting behaviour of using perches gives rise to the colloquial Scots name for the common buzzard of “telegraph pole eagle”.

It has been stated that common buzzards can take significant numbers of game birds, although a study designed to assess levels of game bird predation by raptors in general were found to be on average of the order of 1-2%, and exceptionally 5% (BASC). Predation of mammals of conservation concern (such as red squirrels) varies between regions of Scotland, with very few taken in some areas and higher numbers in others. Common buzzards pose no threats to domestic farm livestock.

What can be done to reduce predation of game birds by common buzzards?

The main period of concern in relation to common buzzards and predation of game birds relates to the July/August period. This is the time when young pheasants, grey and red-legged partridge poults are in and around their release pens, and also when young inexperienced common buzzards fledge and start foraging independently of the adults. It is mainly these young common buzzards that come into conflict with game managers.

Guidance on preventing predation of pheasants and partridges at release pens is available from BASC Scotland. Levels of predation can be lower when there is good shelter and vegetation cover provided for poults in and around release pens. The use of deterrents such as Mylar reflective tape may also assist in reducing predation. A number of game managers may also use diversionary feeding in the form of dead rabbits placed strategically to move common buzzards away from release pens,

Some commercial shoots release more poults to compensate for losses to all forms of predation.

Do common buzzards reduce wild bird populations?

Populations of some species of bird have declined in recent years, and it is sometimes stated that these declines are related to increasing common buzzard populations. There are a number of reasons why this appears not be the case.

- Common buzzards do eat some birds, but they form a relatively insignificant part of their diet, and this is particularly the case for songbirds. Their diet consists primarily of small mammals, lagomorphs and carrion.
- Declines of a number of bird species of conservation concern have also occurred in areas where common buzzards are either absent or at very low population densities. A number of species-specific studies of songbirds in particular have shown that changes to habitat and food supplies are the main reasons for their population declines.
- The timing of many songbird population declines does not match the common buzzard population expansion.

This is not to say that there have not been *local* effects on bird populations of common buzzards on some species in some areas however there is no good evidence to suggest that common buzzard population increases have been responsible for declines in any native Scottish species of wild bird.

Where can I find out more about common buzzards?

- Tubbs, C. 1974. **The Buzzard**. David and Charles, Newton Abbot
- BTO **Bird Facts** www.bto.org.uk
- **The Birds of Scotland** edited by R. W. Forrester, I. J. Andrews, C. J. McInerny, R. D. Murray, R. Y. McGowan, B. Zonfrillo, M. W. Betts, D. C. Jardine, and D. S. Grundy, 2007. Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Aberlady
- **Birds of Prey and Pheasants at Release Pens**. A Practical Guide for Game Managers and Gamekeepers. BASC.
- Park K.J 2005. **The Impacts of Predatory Birds on Waders, Songbirds, Gamebirds and Fisheries Interests**. Centre for Conservation Science, Stirling University/BTO. Research Contract FO4AC20A.

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