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1 L. RAYE

2 The Open University, UK

3 Twitter: @LeafyHistory

4 ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6001-9916>

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9

10
11 **Abstract:** Ravens (*Corvus corax*) and red kites (*Milvus milvus*) were commonly seen in London
12 in the early modern period. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the diversity of attitudes
13 towards these birds. Previous historiography on the subject has failed to contextualise its
14 sources. The excited accounts of travellers like Schaseck, the Venetian Ambassador's
15 amanuensis and Lupold von Wedel need to be counter-balanced by considering the bored
16 antipathy common amongst the British naturalists; William Turner, Francis Willughby and John
17 Ray and the descriptions of sanitation services provided by European naturalists and local
18 poets. The final part of the paper reconstructs the patchwork of legislation and custom
19 relating to the species from early modern London.
20

21 *Corvus corax* – *Milvus milvus* – early modern animal history – urban wildlife – fauna of London – early
22 modern London
23
24

25 Early modern attitudes to the ravens and red kites of London

26

27 This bird [the red kite] has now become exceedingly rare in England; extensive forests or well-
28 wooded districts afforded it the only chance of escape from the war of extermination carried
29 on by those who wished to preserve their poultry or game. Formerly it abounded throughout
30 the country and even in London, where it seems there was a regulation for its protection, so as
31 to have been an object of astonishment to foreigners...¹
32

33 I think it highly probable that till a comparatively late date, Rooks, Carrion Crows and Ravens
34 were afforded a real and active protection in our towns and villages on account of their
35 services to cleanliness, but that, as with so many habits and customs now curious to us, the
36 very ordinariness of their presence in former days led to it being passed over unremarked by
37 contemporary writers...²
38

39 In the nineteenth century, Alfred Newton published the first account telling the story of the former
40 presence of red kites (*Milvus milvus*) as scavengers in medieval and early modern London. This
41 discovery resonated with conservationists; it came at a time when there were only around a dozen red
42 kites left on the island.³ Newton's account was ultimately declensionist (with a grand narrative of
43 decline): it is the story of how a rare bird (the red kite) once found, surprisingly, in London, was lost
44 due to the prejudice of gamekeepers. Fifty years later, Newton's account was updated by Ritchie (our
45 second quotation), who reversed the grand narrative, and extended the account to include the ravens

46 of urban Scotland. Ravens at this time were found almost exclusively in isolated upland areas in the
47 north and west of Britain. Ritchie gave the story as an example of how top-down protective legislation
48 could create an environment where humans could live in harmony with wildlife. Both these narratives
49 were partly informed by the conservationist ethos of the time of writing, but also by the available
50 historical sources; Newton and Ritchie were especially reliant on the accounts of early modern
51 travellers which, as we shall see, were themselves pre-occupied with depicting London, and thus the
52 birds of London, as unusual.

53

54 In the century since they wrote, Newton and Ritchie's accounts have continued to be influential. Most
55 later historical accounts of the ravens and red kites of London have borrowed not only the same
56 conservationist themes of a surprising former harmony, later decline, and the importance of
57 legislation to conserve biodiversity, but were reliant on the very same sources that Newton and
58 Ritchie discovered.⁴ This established narrative has resulted in an unsatisfactory, surface-level
59 historiography which both fails to contextualise accounts of the ravens and red kites of London, and is
60 unable to provide answers about how and why specifically Londoners lived in relative harmony with
61 raptors during the time period. This paper will explore the differing attitudes towards the ravens and
62 red kites held by residents and visitors to early modern London, as well as some of the customs and
63 laws relating to the time period.

64

65 **Early modern London**

66

67 The presence of raptors in early modern London is surprising if the city is imagined as an island of
68 inhospitable streets; a dead spot in the centre of a mosaic of living habitats. But the idea that the city
69 and its surrounding countryside are distinct is fallacious and scholarship over the last few decades has
70 aimed to 'unbound' the city.⁵ The countryside, is of course shaped by human management just like the
71 city.⁶ Most of Britain's surviving wildlife species are adapted to living in close proximity to humans.⁷
72 Even in terms of green space, the country melds into the city in green corridors, whilst many wild
73 species thrive in built areas.⁸ Scavenger species are experts at finding opportunities for food, and
74 urban environments offer many opportunities, as attested by the numbers of feral pigeons and gulls
75 and foxes in London today. Recent environmental history has studied the relationships between
76 humans and animals in the history of London. Early modern London was certainly not a sterile, animal-
77 free place. Even in the 1800s, at least 4,000 acres of the metropolis was still covered by market
78 gardens, orchards, fields and meadows, and less than two-thirds of the metropolis area was built up.⁹
79 Thousands of horses provided transportation around the city. Cattle were kept and butchered in the
80 city and were transported to markets in the centre of London 'on the hoof'. Offal and food disposal

81 methods were often ad-hoc. Pigs and dogs were kept in homes or on the streets. Sanitation was
82 variable and large compost dump sites were formed within the city limits.¹⁰ This is the favourable
83 context¹¹ in which London's ravens and red kites both lived and built relationships with the city's
84 human inhabitants.¹²

85

86 **Ravens and Red Kites as Vermin**

87

88 Not only were British naturalists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries aware of the ravens and
89 red kites of London they also had clear opinions about the species. To these writers, the urban
90 scavengers were vermin. For example, William Turner (1509/10-1568) describes them as a pest both
91 in *Avium praecipuarum* (1544), and in a letter printed in Gessner's (1555) *Historia animalium liber III*:

92

93 I know two sorts of Kites, the greater and the less; the greater is in colour nearly rufous, and in
94 England is abundant and remarkably rapacious. This kind is wont to snatch food out of
95 children's hands, in our cities and towns. The other kind is smaller, blacker, and more rarely
96 haunts cities. This I do not remember to have seen in England, though in Germany most
97 frequently.¹³

98

99 Miluos tales habemus in Anglia, quales nusquā alias uidi. Nostrates sunt Germanicis multò
100 maiores, clamosiores, ad albedinem magis uergentes, & multò rapaciores. Tanta enim est
101 nostrorum miluorum audacia, ut panem pueris pisces fœminis, & sudaria sepibus & uirorum
102 manibus eripere audeant. Imò sæpe pileos hominum capitibus, eo tempore, quo nidulantur, ui
103 auferre solent...¹⁴

104

105 [We have excellent kites in England, I have never seen any others of such size. Ours are much
106 bigger than the German ones, and noisier, with big white patches, and more greedy. In fact,
107 such is the daring of our kites, that they often dare to take bread from children, fish from
108 women, and cloths from hedges and from the hands of men. Indeed, very often they will take
109 the hats from people's heads during the time when they are nesting.]

110

111 The first passage here describes the red kite as a common pest in cities and towns. It is of special
112 interest because it distinguishes the historical London species as red kite (*Milvus milvus*) not black kite
113 (*Milvus migrans*). This distinction agrees with the archaeological record.¹⁵

114

115 Turner's conception of the red kite fits it neatly within the early modern English category of vermin, as
116 described by Mary Fissell.¹⁶ The kite is greedy and eats human food. It is also cunning, and so knows to
117 target human children, who are unable to properly defend themselves, and hedges, where cloth is left,
118 undefended, while it dries. This idea of Britain's red kites is perhaps most famously described in
119 Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* where Autolycus uses the birds as a scapegoat when he steals cloth:
120 'When the kite builds, look to lesser linen'.¹⁷

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The hatred directed towards red kites was not just because they stole hats, fabrics, bread and fish. Other accounts make it clear that kites preyed upon livestock, just like sparrowhawks. Francis Willughby (1635-1672) and John Ray (1627-1705) writing in the seventeenth century described how the birds were common pests to people who kept poultry:

... In England they are seen all the year, neither do they fear or fly our Winters... They are very noisom to tame birds, especially Chickens, Ducklings, and Goslings; among which espying one far from shelter, or that is carelesly separated a good distance from the rest, or by any other means lies fit and exposed to rapine, they single it out, and fly round, round for a while, marking it; then of a sudden dart down as swift as Lightning and catch it up before it is aware, the Dam in vain crying out, and men with hooting and stones scaring them away. Yea so bold are they, that they affect to prey in Cities and places frequented by men; so that the very Gardens and Courts or Yards of houses are not secure from their ravine. For which cause our good Housewives are very angry with them, and of all birds hate and curse them most.¹⁸

Willughby and Ray's account suggests that red kites were a threat especially to young domestic birds ('chickens, ducklings, and goslings' – the term chicken in the seventeenth century referred to only young birds or, 'chicks'),¹⁹ and that fully-grown domestic fowl were at less risk. This predatory behaviour had been central to cultural depictions of the red kite for centuries by the time Willughby and Ray wrote. It was mentioned, for example, in the great medieval encyclopaedias, as the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville as well as the Second Family Bestiaries.²⁰ In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century 'Duke Roland and Sir Otuel of Spain', a group of Saracens seeking to shame Duke Naymes suggested he was more fit to guard against kites, jackdaws and magpies than go to a real battle²¹.

London's ravens had a better reputation than London's red kites among the early naturalists. This is surprising, since in medieval and early modern English culture, ravens were most often associated with death and were considered a bad omen.²² A good example is provided by *The Book of Revelations* (c.1200), by London-based Prior Peter of Cornwall. This book provides us with the story of Martin, who was the parish priest of All-Hallows-upon-the-Cellar in Dowgate. Martin failed to provide spiritual counselling to one of his parishioners, and as a result he fell into a guilty spiral of sin. When he died ravens flew into his room to escort his soul to hell.²³ Surprisingly however, this popular association with death does not seem to have prevented the raven from forming a relationship with the people of pre-industrial urban Britain. Willughby and Ray rather describe the way the raven nests in cities²⁴ as evidence of the species' cleverness and adaptability:

158 Ravens are found not only in one part or Region of the World but abound in all Countries: Do
159 easily bear all changes of weather, fearing neither heat nor cold, enduring well to abide and
160 live where-ever there is plenty of meat for them. And though they are said to love solitude;
161 yet they do very often live and build in the midst of the most populous Cities, as Aldrovandi
162 delivers, and experience confirms. They build in high Trees, or old Towers, in the beginning of
163 March with us in England and sometimes sooner...²⁵
164

165 It is immediately clear that ravens did not only nest in London but also other cities. A few other
166 population centres can be traced: Thomas Browne (1605-1682) describes ravens (although not red
167 kites) as present in Norfolk.²⁶ The evidence that ravens nested at Berwick-on-Tweed and Dundee is
168 discussed with the naturalists' accounts in the next section. John Ruttty also (less reliably) describes
169 ravens nesting in urban areas in his 'Essay toward a Natural History of the County of Dublin' (1772)
170 which suggests they were found in Dublin.²⁷ Finally, as noted by Gurney there is also continental
171 evidence of the urban ravens.²⁸ The second edition of the *Hortus Sanitatis*, (1491) published in Mainz,
172 Germany, depicts a kite [Fig 1] actually sitting on a townspeople's head, together with many other
173 urban commensal and domesticated species (tentatively identifying in rows from top left to bottom
174 right: four European swifts (*Apus apus*), four white storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), chicken (*Gallus gallus*
175 *domesticus*), barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), pigeon (*Columba livia domestica*), red kite, unknown,
176 carrion crow (*Corvus corone*), goose (*Anser anser domesticus*), white stork, barred grass snake (*Natrix*
177 *Helvetica*)). Urban ravens in particular were also described occasionally in accounts from Ancient
178 Greece and Rome, so may have been exploiting urban environments in the early modern period for
179 thousands of years.²⁹ The archaeological record supports this evidence and suggests that ravens may
180 have been formerly common in urban areas across Europe. The position of ravens as scavengers in
181 urban London was not unique.³⁰
182

183 **Fig 1.** The frontispiece for the 'De Auibus' section of the *Hortus Sanitatis*³¹. Book in the public domain.
184

185 **Exotic Ravens and Red Kites in the Travellers' Accounts**

186
187 The characterisation of the London red kite in particular as an unremarkable pest in the accounts of
188 the early naturalists is important, but it is also biased. The seventeenth century naturalists were
189 utilitarian in outlook; they saw part of their role as being to catalogue and study the natural resources
190 of Britain with a view to how they could be best utilised.³² Species like red kites would have had a low
191 exploitation value, although Robert Sibbald (1641-1722) does note a medical use: 'its fat soothes joint
192 pains'.³³ A different perspective can be gained from the accounts of the early modern travellers. They
193 had their own agenda; their stories emphasise the otherness of Britain and focus on its exotic nature.

194 We can focus on three writers in particular whose accounts were central to the modern
195 historiographic narrative of the London ravens and red kites crafted by Yarrell and Ritchie:
196

197 **The account of Schaseck, squire of Jaroslav Lev of Rožmitál (1466)**

198 I have never seen so many kites as I saw there [London]. It is a capital offence to harm them.³⁴

199

200 **The *relazione* of the anonymous amanuensis of Andrea Trevisan (1496-7)**

201 ... it is truly a beautiful thing to behold one or two thousand tame swans upon the river
202 Thames, as I, and also your Magnificence have seen, which are eaten by the English like ducks
203 and geese. Nor do they dislike what we so much abominate, i.e. crows, rooks and jackdaws;
204 and the raven may croak at his pleasure, for no one cares for the omen; there is even a
205 penalty attached to destroying them, as they say they keep the streets of the towns free from
206 all filth.

207

208 It is the same case with the kites, which are so tame, that they often take out of the hands of
209 little children, the bread smeared with butter, in the Flemish fashion, given to them by their
210 mothers. And although this is general throughout the island, it is more observed in the
211 kingdom of England than elsewhere.³⁵

212

213 **The account of Lupold von Wedel (1584-5)**

214 There are many ravens in this town [Berwick-on-Tweed], which it is forbidden to shoot, upon
215 pain of a crown's payment, for they are considered to drive away³⁶ the bad air.³⁷

216

217 The first account was written by Schaseck, who was a squire or armourer of Jaroslav Lev of Rožmitál.
218 The account portrays England as an exotic country rich in natural resources but with a strange
219 landscape and customs. While we know from the naturalists' accounts that London did have a strong
220 red kite population, there is no other evidence to suggest that ravens would have been protected by
221 capital punishment. This is likely to have been invented by Schaseck to emphasise the barbaric nature
222 of London.

223

224 The second extract comes from the official *relazione* (report) submitted by Venetian Ambassador
225 Andrea Trevisan to the Senate after his visit to England. Since this account addresses Trevisan in the
226 third person, it is unlikely to have been written by him, and it is conventional to call the anonymous
227 author the ambassador's amanuensis.³⁸ It is important for us to recognise that this description is
228 stylised. There was an Italian tradition during this period of characterising England as a wild,
229 uncivilised and dangerous place.³⁹ While we know that red kites, crows, rooks, jackdaws and swans
230 were all present in early modern London and could have been seen, the figure of two thousand swans
231 at one time is a likely fabrication. As previously mentioned, ravens could be found in urban areas
232 across Europe so the idea that other countries used to 'abominate' ravens is also at best an over-
233 exaggeration. The characterisation of the raven as a sinister bird did have some currency in early
234 modern Britain.⁴⁰ An entry in *Wedderburne's Compt Buik* dated 1597 in Dundee describes how sinister

235 an eclipse was by describing that even the 'crawis and corbeis and ravenous foullis fled to [from]
236 houssis to our steple and tolbuith and schip tappis most merveulously affrayit'.⁴¹

237

238 The final extract comes from Lupold von Wedel, who was travelling for pleasure rather than business.
239 His account is not from London, but from Berwick-on-Tweed. Although our extract here is short, von
240 Wedel is just as prone to embellishment and exotification as the other writers. Elsewhere in the text,
241 for example, von Wedel attests that the swans were exclusively used by the monarch and were
242 protected on pain of death.⁴² Of course, this is erroneous. Mute Swans were not protected by the
243 death penalty any more than red kites were when Schaseck visited London.⁴³ The fine von Wedel
244 attests for shooting ravens is more reasonable, and agrees with the account by the Ambassador's
245 amanuensis, so may be factual. The reason given for the protection will make sense in the context of
246 the sanitation services provided by ravens and red kites.⁴⁴

247

248 **Ravens and Red Kites as Sanitation Officers**

249

250 While the travellers' accounts agree with the accounts of Britain's early modern naturalists that ravens
251 and red kites were present in London, they disagree about almost everything else. The early modern
252 naturalists' accounts suggest that the species were not unique to London, that they are unremarkable,
253 of low value, and that they were common pests whereas the travellers' accounts suggest that the
254 species were highly valued and even legally protected. The two perspectives can be synthesised by
255 considering exactly why ravens and red kites were tolerated in London.

256

257 John Taylor, the Water Poet (1578-1653), was one of the Watermen of London, and a minor celebrity
258 during his lifetime, perhaps most famous for his publicity stunt journey from London to
259 Queensborough in a boat made of brown paper. Taylor mentions the scavenger species of London as
260 part of a metaphor in his mock sermon: 'A Bawd', which describes the advantages that bawds (widely
261 used to refer to all kinds of socially transgressive people) bring to the commonwealth:

262

263 Rauens, Kites, Crowes, and many other birds of Prey, are tolerated to liue vnhurt, not for any
264 good that is in themselues, but because they doe good offices in deuouring and carrying away
265 our Garbage and noysome excrements, which they liue by: and if they were not our voluntarie
266 Scauengers, wee should be much annoyed with contagious sauors of these corrupted offals.⁴⁵

267

268 Despite the poor reputation of London's wild birds then, it is clear that their presence in the city was
269 seen as positive. In a time when meat and fish was imported into London 'on the hoof' and was
270 butchered and processed in urban slaughterhouses, hungry raptors could be seen as beneficial to the

271 commonwealth.⁴⁶ During this period it was widely believed that miasma or bad air could lead to
272 diseases. Fears of miasma were heightened during epidemics, such as the Oxford Assize fever of 1577,
273 the plague outbreak of 1609 and of course during and following The Great Plague of London in 1665-6.
274 In some cases, court actions were successfully brought against neighbours who caused bad air, not
275 because of the smell but because of the possibility that the bad air might create an infectious
276 disease.⁴⁷ In this context, the 'offices' described as carried out by ravens, kites and crows in this
277 passage exactly fit with our current concept of high-profile wildlife carrying out valuable 'ecosystem
278 services'. Today we might reintroduce beavers to a landscape to raise resilience to flooding.⁴⁸ In the
279 seventeenth century people conserved raptors in London to help improve sanitation and prevent
280 disease.

281

282 This justification for the tolerance of ravens and red kites in London was not unique to Taylor. The
283 same reason is given earlier in the seventeenth century in a poem by Nathaniel Baxter (fl.1569-
284 1611).⁴⁹ It is also repeated by Fynes Moryson (1566-1630), the English traveller, who attests that this
285 tolerance was common throughout the 'great cities'.⁵⁰

286

287 This concept also seems to have had currency in the sixteenth century, when two foreign naturalists
288 reported on it, both publishing in 1555:

289

290 *Il est maintenant defendu aux habitants d'Angleterre sur peine de grosse amende, de ne faire*
291 *aucune violence aux Corbeaux, d'autant qu'ils se nourrissent en leurs païs, de charongne, dont*
292 *ils les en deliurent, qui autrement pourroit empuantir l'aër: comme aussi vivent des poissons*
293 *que la mer á deiecté au riuage.*⁵¹

294

295 [It is now forbidden to the inhabitants of England, under pain of a heavy fine, to do any
296 violence to ravens, especially because they feed in their country on carrion, which they relieve
297 them of, and which otherwise could foul the air, likewise they also live on the fish which are
298 thrown up onto the shore from the sea.]

299

300 *Vix majorem in Cairo milviorum frequentiam conspici existimo, quam Londini Trenobantum in*
301 *Britannia, qui nullo non anni tempore frequentissimi istic apparent, cùm enim eos interficere*
302 *vetitum sit, ut spurcitiem in plateas, vel etiam ipsum flumen Thamesini qui urbem alluit ab*
303 *incolis ejectam, legant & devorent...*⁵²

304

305 [I estimate kites to be only just more common in Cairo than in London in Britain where at all
306 times they seem very common. It is forbidden to kill them there, as they consume and devour
307 the filth of the streets, and even that thrown by locals into the River Thames, which flows
308 through the city...]

309

310 In the first extract, Pierre Belon (1517-1564) suggests that recent legislation has been put in place to
311 protect ravens on a national level. In the second, edited by Carolus Clusius (1526-1609), the

312 importance of ravens for keeping the banks of the Thames sanitary is emphasised. Taken together the
313 two accounts suggest that ravens and red kites were legally protected based on the services they
314 carried out in London and especially along waterways. It seems probable that the shoreline Belon had
315 in mind was the tidal Thames in London, since dead fish outside of urban areas would be a less serious
316 problem even if they were not eaten by other scavengers.

317

318 **Legal Protection for Ravens and Red Kites?**

319

320 I have quoted extracts from both the 1555 naturalists' accounts because they present an interesting
321 question. These accounts refer to a recently passed protective law in England. However, no such law
322 seems to exist in the *Statutes of the Realm*. The *Acte against taking of Hawks* (1539)⁵³ and the *Acte*
323 *ayenst Destrucyon of Wyldfowle* (1533 – repealed in 1549)⁵⁴ do not apply to ravens or red kites, and
324 the latter actually expressly excludes 'crowes, choughes, ravons and busardes' from protection. Of
325 course, crows were not only unprotected but their control was legally mandated by the first Grain Act,
326 the *Acte made and ordenyed to dystroye Chouches, Crowes and Roks* (1532).⁵⁵ This law is referred to
327 by Gerolamo Cardano in *De Subtilitate* (1550), which was quoted by another European naturalist,
328 Conrad Gessner, in 1555:

329

330 In Britannia abundant cornices ut ob frugum damna nuper publico consilio cornices
331 perdentibus proposita praemia sint.⁵⁶

332

333 [In Britain crows are common - on account of the destruction of crops lately, a bounty has
334 been declared for a public plan for destroying crows.]

335

336 On the contrary, under the second *Grain Act* (1566) ravens and red kites were actually subject to a
337 compulsory pest control law alongside most other predatory species of wildlife in England. However,
338 red kites and ravens living in urban areas like London were explicitly excepted from this pest control:

339

340 And bee it further provyded, That this Acte or any Thing therein contened, shall not extende
341 to gyve or appoint any soome or soomes of Money to be givyn payde or distrybuted to any
342 person or persons for... the killing and bringing the Head of any Kyte or Raven killed in any City
343 or Towne Corporate, or within two Myles of the same.⁵⁷

344

345 It is easy to imagine that this exemption from pest control for the urban ravens and red kites might be
346 confused with a protection act. However, Belon and Clusius were writing in 1555, before the second
347 *Grain Act* (1566) was passed. The existence of a protection act before 1555 is also attested in some of
348 our traveller's accounts, as can be seen in Table 1.

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Table 1. Sources which attest to a hypothetical lost law protecting ravens and red kites in England.

On the basis of this evidence, it is possible that a lost law was implemented before 1466 which prohibited killing ravens and red kites in England in general or London in particular. However, the existence of this law is improbable. The fact that it is mainly referred to by foreign sources, and the fact that the sources cannot agree on what the Act actually criminalised, or the punishment indicated is suspicious. The existence of the *Grain Acts* and the exclusion of ravens from the *Acte ayenst Destruccon of Wyldfowle* (1533) also cast serious doubts about the existence of a lost raptor protection act. The statutes from this period refer to each other in cases where they apply to similar situations, but I have not found any reference to a law protecting kites and ravens in the related statutes. The reference in Willughby and Ray to men throwing stones at kites⁵⁸ suggests that if there was such a law it was a very limited one.⁵⁹ Most probably, legal protection for medieval raptors belongs to the mythology of London, alongside Charles II keeping ravens in the Tower of London, and the threat of capital punishment for harming a swan.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Ravens and red kites seem to have been quietly lost from London in the eighteenth century. The last record of a raven nesting in London is from 1777. The nesting location was Gray's Inn,⁶¹ which was adjacent to the humorously named Mount Pleasant, an eight-and-half-acre dump site where the city's refuse was brought and deposited⁶² – an idyllic site for a raven. The species seems to have been quietly extirpated from Middlesex, Cheshire and Lancashire around the same time.⁶³ Lovegrove, has attributed the loss of these species to the bounties paid on 'vermin' species after the second *Grain Act* (1566).⁶⁴ But given that the *Grain Act* prohibited taking ravens and red kites in London, and that the species continued to thrive in London for two centuries after 1566, there must have been local factors involved in the extinction there. Keith Thomas has argued that kites began to decline in urban areas as the local authorities began regularly clearing the streets and selling manure to farmers, as well as paying bounties to exterminators.⁶⁵ O'Connor agreed that contemporary changes in disposal of refuse and also the felling of trees in urban areas likely led to a lack of food and habitat for the species around the same time period.⁶⁶ With improved sanitation, the services of London raptors may not have been so relevant.⁶⁷ Both ravens and red kites were lost from most of England and Wales by 1870, and the red kite was lost from Scotland around 1880.

384 However, that was not the end of Britain's ravens and red kites. Over the last century, populations
385 have recovered. A scheme of bounty payments for each successful nest reversed the decline of the red
386 kite in Wales, so that the population increased from ten pairs in the 1930s to sixty pairs in the 1990s.⁶⁸
387 From 1989-1994 a reintroduction to the Chilterns ultimately led to the establishment of 250+ breeding
388 pairs in south east England in 2005.⁶⁹ This population has even begun to visit the northern and
389 western suburbs of London where it is an increasingly common resident and occasional breeder.⁷⁰
390 Ravens have recolonised naturally without reintroduction, and over the last fifty years have spread
391 from exclusively being resident in Wales, Scotland, the Westcountry and north west England, to also
392 starting to breed in the London area.⁷¹ The returned success of these species in lowland and urban
393 England offers us a different perspective with which to view the raptors of early modern London.

394

395 The introduction to this essay described a narrative about the raven and red kite constructed by
396 Newton and Ritchie. Their story was of how two surprising raptors of London were almost driven to
397 extinction following the loss of legal protection. The problem with this narrative is that it was
398 ahistorical and fixated on the contemporary status of these species. Part of the issue is that for
399 Newton and Ritchie, London was a civilised, urban environment, unfriendly to nature and therefore
400 not a place where rare wild raptors could ever be expected. The story was of interest to the two
401 because it illustrated the 'Strange, wild times when the Sparrow scavengers of modern thoroughfares
402 were replaced in numbers and in assurance by Rooks, Carrion Crows and Ravens!'⁷² Even for Keith
403 Thomas, writing in 1991, episodes like the eradication of the red kite were used to make arguments
404 about urban humans establishing dominion over their local environments and ultimately dividing their
405 civilised cities from the rural surroundings.⁷³ For Newton and Ritchie, this narrative was partly drawn
406 from the early modern travellers' accounts which emphasised the strangeness of the raptors in order
407 to exoticise London. But now that ravens and red kites are once more to be found visiting London, this
408 portrayal is no longer satisfactory. Part of the aim of this paper has been to complicate and
409 'unbound'⁷⁴ the story of the early modern raven and red kite by considering a more complete,
410 balanced range of sources. In the early modern period, British naturalists saw the species as ingenious,
411 greedy species of vermin. Travellers portrayed the species as evidence of Britain's strangeness.
412 European naturalists noted, perhaps enviously, that the birds carried out a useful function, and poets
413 used the birds as evidence that a little vice could be a good thing. Early modern London itself, facing
414 the challenges of undeveloped sanitation, street cleaning, and the abundance of offal from butchered
415 cattle, invited wild raptors with its abundant habitats and feeding and nesting opportunities. The
416 single, top-down law protecting ravens and red kites in London which Newton and Ritchie celebrated

417 probably did not exist. The uneasy alliance between Londoners and raptors in the early modern period
418 was more likely ad-hoc and based on a partnership of mutually beneficial practices.

419

NOTES

¹ W. Yarrell and A. Newton, *A History of British Birds*, 4th edn (London: Gurney & Jackson, 1874), I, 94; see also: A. Newton and others, *A Dictionary of Birds* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896), 226, 489–90; R. Lovegrove, *The Kite's Tale: The Story of the Red Kite in Wales* (Sandy: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 1990), 48.

² J. Ritchie, *The Influence of Man on Animal Life in Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 224–26.

³ Yarrell and Newton, *A History of British Birds* I, 69; W. Yarrell and A. Newton, *A History of British Birds*, 4th edn (London: John van Voorst, 1882), II, 261.

⁴ Most influentially: J.H. Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1921), 82; R.S.R. Fitter, *London's Natural History* (London: Collins, 1959), 51; Lovegrove, *The Kite's Tale: The Story of the Red Kite in Wales*, 28–37; C. Matheson, *Changes in the Fauna of Wales within Historic Times* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1932), 14–17; D. Ratcliffe, *The Raven: A Natural History in Britain and Ireland* (London: T& A D Poyser, 1997). I. Carter, *The Red Kite's Year* (Exeter: Pelagic Publishing, 2019), chap. 3. Lovegrove adds additional sources but borrows the same themes and narrative. In general archaeologists have paid more attention to wild birds than historians have. It has been argued that ravens were common commensals in the Roman period, although raven remains on a key Iron Age site seem to have been ritual deposits: T. O'Connor, 'Animals in Urban Life in Medieval to Early Modern England', in *The Oxford Handbook of Zooarchaeology*, ed. by U. Albarella and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 214–29 (pp. 214–29)

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199686476.013.13>>; D. Serjeantson and J. Morris, 'Ravens and Crows in Iron Age and Roman Britain', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 30.1 (2011), 85–107.

⁵ H. Leitner and E. Sheppard, 'Unbounding Critical Geographic Research on Cities: The 1990s and Beyond', *Urban Geography*, 24.6 (2003), 510–28.

⁶ T. Williamson, *An Environmental History of Wildlife in England 1650-1950* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 1.

⁷ B. Macdonald, *Rebirding: Rewilding Britain and Its Birds* (Exeter: Pelagic Publishing Ltd, 2019), 92.

⁸ M. Thomson, 'Placing the Wild in the City: "Thinking with" Melbourne's Bats', *Society & Animals*, 15.1 (2007), 79–95.

⁹ T. Almeroth-Williams, *City of Beasts: How Animals Shaped Georgian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 2–3.

¹⁰ Almeroth-Williams, chap. 3; E. Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600-1770* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 107, 166–67, 186–90, 192–94, 201.

¹¹ Of course, London changed through the modern period. In 1600 the population was 200,000. By the mid-eighteenth century it had nearly quadrupled to 750,000. As London grew, its streets were increasingly paved, and more drainage systems and sewers were installed. Following the Great Plague (1665-6) and the Great Fire of London (1666), houses were increasingly built of brick rather than timber, and built higher than previously. The removal of rubbish from streets became more of a priority to avoid breeding 'bad air' and increasing the risk of fire. These developments must have presented new challenges and opportunities to London's raptors, who had a continuous presence in the city throughout the period.

¹² Williamson, *An Environmental History of Wildlife in England 1650-1950*, 60.

¹³ A.H. Evans, *Turner: On Birds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 117.

¹⁴ C. Gessner, *Historiae Animalium Liber III* (Zurich: Christoph. Frochoverum, 1555), 586.

¹⁵ Evans, *Turner: On Birds*, 117; D.W. Yalden and U. Albarella, *The History of British Birds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 212.

¹⁶ M. Fissell, 'Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England', in *History Workshop Journal*, 1999, 1–29.

¹⁷ J. Jowett and others, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1139 (4.3).

Scholarship on the kite also sometimes quotes the 'city of crows and kites' in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, but this quotation is taken out of context; the city referred to there is Rome, not London, and the crows and kites are not literal birds but the people of Rome who 'peck the eagles' by their insistence on democracy. *ibid.*, 1104 (3.1); 1112 (4.5).

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- ¹⁸ J. Ray, *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby of Middleton* (London: Royal Society, 1678: Wing (CD-Rom, 1996), W2880), 75 (l.1.8.5).
- ¹⁹ Compare definition 1a and 1d in: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 2018 'Chicken' <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/31547>, Accessed: 07/11/2018.
- ²⁰ R. Barber, *Bestiary* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 177; S.A. Barney and others, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 268 (XII.vii.58).
- ²¹ E. Melick, 'Duke Roland and Sir Otuel of Spain', in *The Roland and Otuel Romances and the Anglo-Norman Otinel*, ed. by E. Melick, S. Fein, and D.B. Raybin (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019), II. 283–288.
- ²² J.E. Harting, *The Ornithology of Shakespeare* (London: John Van Voorst, 1871), 99–115; M.S. Griffith, 'Convention and Originality in the Old English "Beasts of Battle" Typescene', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22 (1993), 179–99.
- ²³ R. Easting and R. Sharpe, *Peter of Cornwall's Book of Revelations* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013), 288–91; M.D. Barbezat, 'Depression, Guilt, and a Parish Priest in Medieval London', *Histories of Emotion*, 2015 <<https://historiesofemotion.com/2015/05/15/depression-guilt-and-a-parish-priest-in-medieval-london/>> [accessed 9 July 2020].
- ²⁴ This passage incidentally refutes Ritchie's suggestion that ravens nested and roosted outside cities and only flocked together to eat rubbish at peak times. Ritchie, *The Influence of Man on Animal Life in Scotland*, 226.
- ²⁵ Ray, *Ornithology*, 122 (l.2.2.1).
- ²⁶ T. Browne, *Notes and Letters on the Natural History of Norfolk*, ed. by T. Southwell (London: Jarrold & Sons, 1902), 27.
- ²⁷ J. Ruddy, *An Essay Towards a Natural History of the County of Dublin* (Dublin: W. Sleater, 1772: Smith, J. Descriptive catalogue of Friends' books, II, 524), i. This text may not be reliable record of the presence of ravens in Dublin. The text is actually a direct quotation from Thomas Pennant's *British Zoology* (1768), which in turn has echoes of the description of the English kites in Carolus Clusius (also presented with the naturalists' accounts).
- ²⁸ Gurney, *Early Annals of Ornithology*, 80.
- ²⁹ H. Rackham, *Pliny Natural History: Books VIII-XI* (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1947), 370–71; J. Mynott, *Birds in the Ancient World: Winged Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 147–49; D.M. Balme, *Aristotle: History of Animals Books VII-X*, ed. by A. Gotthelf (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1991), 288–289 (VIII.23).
- ³⁰ T. O'Connor, 'Birds and the Scavenger Niche', *Archaeofauna*, 2 (1993), 155–62.
- ³¹ *Ortus Sanitatis*, ed. by J. Meydenbach (Mainz: Jacob Meydenbach, 1491).
- ³² E. Yale, *Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 29–31.
- ³³ R. Sibbald, *The Wild Plants of Scotland and The Animals of Scotland*, ed. by L. Raye (Cardiff: KDP, 2020), 15 (II:3).
- ³⁴ M. Letts, *The Travels of Leo of Rozmital through Germany, Flanders, England, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy 1465-1467* (Farnham: The Hakluyt Society Second Series no 58, 1955), 51.
- ³⁵ C.A. Sneyd, *A Relation or Rather a True Account of the Island of England* (London: Camden Society, 1847), 11.
- ³⁶ 'Sie die luft bose... sullen' ('they sweeten the bad air' (assuming *sullen*>*sussen*)).
- ³⁷ G. von Bülow, 'Journey through England and Scotland Made by Lupold von Wedel in the Years 1584 and 1585', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1895), 223–70 (p. 240) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3678110>>.
- ³⁸ M. Wyatt, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19–20, 269.
- ³⁹ E.G. Domnina, "'The Riches of England Are Greater than Those of Any Other Country in Europe": A Venetian Image of Early Modern England', in *Mighty Europe 1400-1700*, ed. by A. Hiscock (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 117–32.
- ⁴⁰ Harting, *The Ornithology of Shakespeare*, 99–108; R. Bosworth-Smith, *Bird Life and Bird Lore* (London: John Murray, 1905), 125–28.
- ⁴¹ *The Compt Buik of David Wedderburne Merchant of Dundee 1587-1630*, ed. by A.H. Millar (Edinburgh: Publications of the Scottish History Society, vol. 28, 1898), 33.
- ⁴² von Bülow, 'Journey through England and Scotland', 228.
- ⁴³ R. Spalding and A. Brown, *Entertainment, Leisure and Identities* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 14–19; N.F. Ticehurst, 'An Historical Review of the Laws, Orders and Customs Anciently Used for the Preservation of Swans in England', *British Birds*, 19.8 (1926), 186–205.
- ⁴⁴ L.L. Ford, 'Wedel, Lupold von (1544-1615)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2009 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/92463>> [accessed 2 July 2018].

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- ⁴⁵ J. Taylor, *All the Workes of Iohn Taylor the Water Poet* (London: Iames Boler, 1630: STC (2nd ed.), 23725), 99.
- ⁴⁶ Williamson, *An Environmental History of Wildlife in England*, 60.
- ⁴⁷ Cockayne, *Hubbub*, 212–13.
- ⁴⁸ As for example the current population kept in an enclosure at the Forest of Dean to reduce flooding on the River Wye. For more about beaver ecosystem services see: D. Müller-Schwarze and L. Sun, *The Beaver: Natural History of a Wetlands Engineer* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁹ N. Baxter, *Sir Philip Sydney's Ourania* (London, 1606: STC (2nd ed.), 1598), n.p.
- ⁵⁰ F. Moryson, *An Itinerary Written by Fynes Moryson* (London: Printed by John Beale, 1617: STC (2nd ed.), 18205), 147.
- ⁵¹ P. Belon, *L'histoire de La Nature Des Oyseaux* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1555), 279.
- ⁵² P. Belon, *Plurimarum Singularium et Memorabilium Rerum Etc.*, ed. by C. Clusius (Flanders, 1555), 108.
- ⁵³ *Statutes of the Realm, Vol 3 (1509-1545)* (London: Printed by Command of his Majesty King George III, 1817). 31 Hen 8 c.12.
- ⁵⁴ *Statutes of the Realm, Vol 3 (1509-1545)*. 25 Hen 8, c.11.
- ⁵⁵ *Statutes of the Realm, Vol 3 (1509-1545)*. 24 Henry VIII c.10
- ⁵⁶ Gessner, *Historiae Animalium Liber III*, 312; G. Cardano, *De Subtilitate* (Paris, 1550), 192.
- ⁵⁷ *Statutes of the Realm, Vol 4 (1547-1585)* (London: Printed by Command of his Majesty King George III, 1819). 8 Eliz 1 c.15
- ⁵⁸ Ray, *Ornithology*, 75 (l.1.8.5).
- ⁵⁹ Before the *Laws in Wales Acts* (1535 & 1542), ravens were protected in the Welsh law codes. The *Latin A* and *Blegywryd* lawbooks both assign a fine of forty pence for killing a raven, eagle or crane (*Grus grus*) on somebody else's land. The *Cyfnernth* lawbook orders that the king is to be paid the legal value of any killed raven, eagle or crane presumably to remove any financial incentive for hunting these birds. H.D. Emanuel, *The Latin Texts of the Welsh Laws* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967). The Welsh text of the *Cyfnernth* law is found in [BL Harley MS 4353](#) and the [Plas Bodorgan, Bodorgan MS](#). The *Blegywryd* law is found in [Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 36B](#) and [Oxford Jesus College MS 57](#).
- ⁶⁰ Ticehurst, 'Swans in England'. B. Sax, 'How Ravens Came to the Tower of London', *Society & Animals*, 15.3 (2007), 269–83.
- ⁶¹ J. Gooders, *Birds That Came Back* (Worcester: Ebenezer Baylis and Son Ltd, 1983), 61.
- ⁶² Cockayne, *Hubbub*, 190.
- ⁶³ R. Lovegrove, *Silent Fields: The Long Decline of a Nation's Wildlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 120–26.
- ⁶⁴ Lovegrove, *Silent Fields: The Long Decline of a Nation's Wildlife*, 120–27, 163–68.
- ⁶⁵ K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London: Penguin, 1991), 274.
- ⁶⁶ T. O'Connor, *Animals as Neighbours* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 114.
- ⁶⁷ Macdonald, *Rebirding*, 49.
- ⁶⁸ Carter, *The Red Kite's Year*, chap. 3.
- ⁶⁹ I. Carter and G. Whitlow, *Red Kites in the Chilterns*, 2nd edn (Chinnor: English Nature & The Chilterns Conservation Board, 2005).
- ⁷⁰ London Natural History Society, *London Bird Report 2016* (London: London Natural History Society, 2018), 56–58.
- ⁷¹ London Natural History Society, *London Bird Report 2016*, 150–51. D. Massimino and others, *BirdTrends 2019: Trends in Numbers, Breeding Success and Survival for UK Breeding Birds.*, *BTO Research Report 722*. (Thetford: BTO, 2019) <www.bto.org/birdtrends>.
- ⁷² Ritchie, *The Influence of Man on Animal Life in Scotland*. 225.
- ⁷³ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 244–45, 274.
- ⁷⁴ For unbounding see: Thomson; 'Thinking with Melbourne's Bats', Leitner and Sheppard, 'Unbounding Critical Geographic Research on Cities'.

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436 NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

437 Dr Lee Raye is an Associate Lecturer at the Open University. They specialise in the pre-industrial
438 history of wildlife and wildflowers in Britain and Ireland. Their current project is *The Atlas of Early*
439 *Modern Wildlife*, which describes the state of nature from 1500-1760 CE, based on the wild
440 populations recorded by early modern British and Irish naturalists, topographers and travellers. You
441 can follow Lee on Twitter at @LeafyHistory.