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Once Upon a Rookery

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Abstract

The fate of rookeries in Britain over the twentieth century is briefly reviewed and related to changes, particularly in the last 50 years, to rookeries in a single village context in mid Wales. Recent predation of some of these rookeries by Red Kite is set in the wider context of potentially increased predation of established bird species by human vectored or supported species.

Main Text

As 2023 is the year of the most recent rookery (*Corvus frugilegus*) census, I took the idle option of simply watching the three small rookeries which I can see from my garden. Having lived in or near Newbridge on Wye for almost fifty years, where the Wye neatly divides my observations between Radnorshire and Brecknock, I have, in this last half century, come to admire the tenacity of the species to survive against largely human depredations.

At the turn of the twentieth century Cambridge Phillips (1899) noted rooks as “plentiful” with “several large rookeries in the county” (Brecknock), whereas Walpole Bond (1903) from his base near Builth, dismisses the species as “the well-known rook”. So apparently little cause for concern. However, as the century progressed, the national population of rooks rose between the end of the First World War until the 1960s when it suffered a decade of decline before increasing again until about 1997, from about which point the Breeding Bird Survey showed a significant decline until 2018. This final period of decline was largely because the species could be shot under General Licence until it was removed from this list in 2019 to help stem the decline (Pritchard *et al*, 2021). Indeed, all these fluctuations can, at least in part, be apportioned to human influence, the reduction in game keeping after the First World War, the decade in the 1960s of the “Silent Spring”, and the effects of being on the General Licence.

Against this background, how have my own modest observations fitted in to this more general story? What began as a simple count of activity, has developed into a quite tangled web of species interactions, where human behaviour has become the vector, if not the direct cause, of apparent changes in niches occupied by expanding and established species.

When I first came to the area, and to a lesser extent even today, any black corvid was a “crow” and crows needed controlling. In the 1970s, there were two largish rookeries of 30-50 nests in woodland on the Brecknock side of the river, with a 20-nest rookery, with two heron nests close by, on the Radnor bank of the Wye and a 10-nest rookery in the village. By about 1980 the woodland containing one of the two Brecknock rookeries had been felled and by the middle of the decade the second rookery had “disappeared”, so no nesting rooks remained on that side of the river.

In the early 1990s the riverside rookery on the Radnorshire side of the Wye also “disappeared” over a couple of seasons, but the village site had spread to two groups of trees some 100m apart. By the late 1990s the most recent of the two village rookeries became part of a housing development and the rookery was lost but seemed to then take up residence in pine trees on the main road in the centre of the village, where they thrived for several years. Sadly, this area also became part of another housing development, and the trees were felled. The village and area now had just one modest rookery on the Llandrindod road out of the village.

From my riverside house in the village, where, when I first arrived there, there were nesting Skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*), Lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*) and Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) within earshot, but within the four plus decades since, these ground nesters have gone and I can now see the nesting woodlands of two incomers, Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and at least three pairs of Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*).

However, in 2020, a pair of Rooks took up residence and bred in trees behind the chapel visible from my house. In 2021 three more successful Rooks’ nests were built some 30m from the first. In 2022 the 2020 nest was not used but 100m away on the Brecknock side of the river, but still within my view, a new rookery of 10 nests was successfully established. In 2023 a further new rookery of nine nests was established in roadside trees some 200m north of the other Brecknock site. None of the nests on the Radnorshire side were used but I could observe the Brecknock nests from my garden!

The usual rookery cacophony continued at both sites until, between 23rd and 26th April, I repeatedly saw patrolling Red Kites heavily mobbed by Rooks in spite of which the Kites regularly dropped down to one nest after another, flying away each time with a nestling-sized object. On at least one occasion the Kite landed in a rookery tree and moved branch to branch and nest to nest as if to check nothing had been missed. This observation is not new as Cramp (1980) specifically notes corvids, particularly “vulnerable young” amongst the food of Red Kites and Lovegrove (1990) says that when Red Kite have unfledged young “some pairs may quarter over woodland canopy searching for nests full of young rooks and other corvids” but I had not witnessed such mass destruction in this area before.

I wonder if the Kites were the only predator of the rookery as my neighbour’s doves are taken regularly by the local Goshawk which nests 1km west of the rookery with a flight path to the doves which would take them over this rookery? There is also a Goshawk nest 2km north of the rookeries, another potential if not actual threat. Pritchard *et al* (2021) cites probable Goshawk predation as the reason for the loss of a large rookery in Brecknock and Jennings (2014) notes both Goshawk and Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) as nest predators of rooks.

Of the Skylarks, Curlew and Lapwings which once nested in the valley pastures, at least the first two still nest on the Brecon Bluffs, those fingered ridges fringing the southern end of the Elenydd uplands some 5km and more, north-west of Newbridge. In the early 1990s, studies at the Llysdinam Field Centre demonstrated serious predation of Curlew and Lapwing nests by Carrion Crows. Today in these uplands, Red Kite, which may themselves predate these corvids, have been observed taking curlew chicks but the former probably does not balance out the latter! Kites have a wide, opportunistic diet, so little that is edible will be ignored, for example, a section of Sea Lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) found in the walled garden of Llysdinam House some 250m from the Wye at Newbridge, was almost certainly river scavenged carrion dropped by a Red Kite. (fig. 1).

In Britain as a whole, the Red Kite success story has largely been vectored by human intervention, as has the release and re-establishment of the Goshawk. At the time of writing another vectored species, the Pine Marten (*Martes martes*), is now within under 10km of Newbridge-on-Wye and Birks (2017) reports that it predated ground nesting birds (look out Curlews!), will opportunistically take corvids (look out Rooks?) and has a penchant for the contents of nest boxes (look out decades of Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) data!)

So, my quiet observation of a couple of fledgeling rookeries has made me question if we fully realise how the undoubted success of iconic predators, such as Red Kite, Goshawk and Pine Marten will change the sights and sounds of our future countryside, from our village you can no longer hear Skylark, Curlew or Lapwing in surrounding fields, it would be a great loss if the village Rooks were similarly silenced.

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Figure 1. Part of Sea Lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) dropped into the

Walled garden at Llysdyman, almost certainly by a Red Kite. June 2011