

ON THE FORMER ABUNDANCE OF THE KITE, BUZZARD, AND RAVEN IN KENT

BY

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IN my *History of the Birds of Kent* (pp. 280 and 281) I suggested that it was not unreasonable to suppose that, at any rate a proportion of the Kites (*M. milvus*) that were so common about London and its outskirts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had their homes in the adjoining woodland districts of Kent. At the same time we had no direct evidence of the bird as a Kentish breeding species until it was on the verge of extinction in the early years of the nineteenth century. It has recently been my good fortune to obtain much important direct evidence relating to a period between the two above mentioned of the former status and actual great abundance of the Kite in Kent, as well as of the Buzzard (*Buteo b. buteo*) and Raven (*Corvus c. corax*).

Some three or four years ago Mr. A. H. Taylor published, in a local Almanac and Directory, a few extracts, from the Churchwarden's Accounts of Tenterden of the seventeenth century, relating to rewards paid for the killing of vermin. These at once suggested to me the desirability of going into these records at greater length. I have at last been able to do this, and have been surprised at the wealth of information contained in them with regard to the former status of certain mammals and birds in the Weald of Kent. It is not possible here to do more than summarize a part of the evidence relating to the above three-species, but I hope to be able to publish a more extensive analysis of the whole elsewhere.

The volume of accounts in question is the earliest now remaining, and dates from A.D. 1626-7 to 1711-12; entries of rewards for vermin run through the entire volume, varying in number from one or two per annum to as many as two and even six and seven pages. With the exception of a few years between 1644 and 1654 and after 1695, when the items are lumped into a single total payment, they are set out in detail, for the most part under the heads of separate species, though a good many mixed lots occur.

The Kite is first mentioned in the year 1654-5, and between that year and 1675-6 an average of something between two and three per annum were paid for. In the following year there began, as is evident from the sudden rise in the number of entries of all kinds, what may be termed an intensive campaign for the thinning out of vermin, and it becomes at

once evident how exceedingly common the Kite must have been. Prior to this no particular attention seems to have been paid to them, and people appear to have devoted their attention primarily to hedgehogs, foxes, polecats, Crows and Magpies. This effort was kept up for a period of about fourteen years, during the first ten of which no fewer than 380 Kites were paid for, one hundred of them alone being killed in the year 1684-5. In the next two years, although there is no evidence of slackening of the general effort, the number of Kites dropped from thirty-five in 1686-7 to thirteen and two respectively, and thereafter no more than a dozen are included in any one year's accounts. If the same thing was going on to anything like the same extent in other wealden parishes, no large raptorial bird could long withstand the drain on its numbers, and it is easy to understand the above drop, and how the foundation was laid for the final extinction of this bird during the succeeding century.

With regard to the Raven and Buzzard the above remarks also apply, but to a lesser degree. Both species must have perforce belonged almost entirely to a tree-building race, and the numbers recorded do not suggest that either was anything like so common as the Kite. Prior to 1676 only fourteen Ravens and three Buzzards are entered, but during the next fourteen years 198 Ravens and 56 Buzzards were accounted for.

The easiest method of procuring these birds in quantity would naturally be to take them from the nest when partially feathered, and the constant repetition of entries of them in lots of two, three, and four suggests that the majority of them were thus obtained. Except during the first few years of the accounts, none of these vermin entries is dated, but here and there occur items of payments for other matters that are, and so it is sometimes possible to fix approximate dates for the vermin payments. Particularly is this the case for the years 1681-2 and 1682-3; here dated items are well distributed throughout the vermin entries, and it is quite evident that the majority of the Kites, Buzzards and Ravens paid for in those years were killed during the nesting-season. From one or two entries in other years that can be approximately dated in the same way, a similar deduction can be drawn.

There are only two items in the whole book that give direct evidence on this point and they are :—

1629-30.	
Itm pd to Wm. Skilton for the heads of 3 yong	
Buzzards	iiijd.

1681-2 (on some date between April 27th and May 2nd, 1681).
 To John Greenland for 6 Jaye's heads and 2 Kyte's
 eggs 0 0 8

The latter is the only instance of eggs, and the former the only instance of young birds being actually mentioned, while it is also the earliest mention of the Buzzard.

The Raven occurs first in 1641-2, thus :—

Itm to Edward Yong's boye for 4 Raven's heads .. 0 0 4

and the Kite in 1654-5, thus :—

Itm paid to Thomas Wright and John fowle for 4
 dozen of Crowe's heads and 6 Kyte's heads 00 01 03
 Itm paid to Thomas Kyte for 20 Crowe's heads and
 fower Kyte's heads 00 00 07

The following entries may be quoted as typical, and did space permit could be extended to many pages :—

1667-8.
 Paid to Thomas Jonas for 4 Raven's heads and 1 hedge-
 hogg's head 0 0 4
 To John Drew for 1 dozen of Crowe's heads and for 3
 Kytes 0 0 8

1668-9.
 To Richard Kyte for 3 dozen of Crowe's and 2 Jeys, 2
 Hedhoggys, 7 Kytes and 4 Ravens 0 1 9

1680-81.
 To Wm. Baker for 16 crowe's heads, 1 hedhogg's
 head, 2 Kyte's heads & 5 Raven's heads 0 1 3
 To John Morphett for 2 Kyte's heads, 4 Woodpeckers &
 8 Crowe's heads 0 0 10
 To Wm. Baker for 4 Kyte's, 1 Pulcat and 4 Raven's
 heads 0 1 2
 To Tho. Curteis for 1 Buzard's head & 6 Crowe's heads 0 0 30b

1681-82 (under date Ap. 27th to May 2nd).
 To Edward Caffinch for 2 Kyte's heads 0 0 4
 To John Brooke for 6 Raven's heads 0 0 6

(Under date May 3rd.)
 To Francis Holmes for 4 Kyte's heads 0 0 8

(Under date May 4th to 21st.)
 To John Greenland for 4 Kyte's heads 0 0 8
 To Joseph Page for 5 Kyte's heads 0 0 10

(Under date June 7th to July 8th.)
 To Bryan Pencrasse for 3 Kyte's & 6 Raven's heads 0 1 0
 To Robt. Franklin for 2 Pulcats, 2 doz. of Crowe's
 heads & 6 Kytes 0 1 10

1682-3 (under date Ap. 19th to 30th).
 To Reginald Mantell for 2 Buzzard's heads 0 0 4
 To Robt. Mees for 3 Buzzard's heads 0 0 6
 To John Tompkinds for 2 Kyte's heads 0 0 4

(Under date May 1st to 26th.)
 To Tho. Curteis for 4 Kytes & 1 Sparrowhawke .. 0 0 10
 To Tho. Curteis for 2 Buzzards & 8 Crowe's heads 0 0 6

The following two items are remarkable for the large number of heads that each records. At first sight it would appear that some error had been made, but in each case the price paid does not fit in with the usual tariff for the species mentioned or for any other of the vermin enumerated, and it is clear, I think, that they must have been all quite small young ones taken from the nest, and the reward has been reduced accordingly, as was done in other instances in mammalian items. The first would represent the contents of fifteen to twenty Kite's nests, and the second that of three or four Raven's nests.

1676-7.				
francis Peck, for 3 dozen & halfe of Kyte's heads & one				
hedghogg's head	o 1 1
1688-9.				
To Tho. Hutton for 16 Raven's heads		o 0 6

The rewards paid for Kites were very variable from year to year—a penny each being often paid, at other times twopence, though in two instances they were valued at so little as a farthing apiece. Buzzards fetched a penny in 1629 and twopence in 1680 and after; while Ravens were valued at a halfpenny in 1667, three halfpence in 1683, otherwise they were worth a penny each. It may here be noted that the value of a Sparrow-Hawk was invariably twopence, so that there was no inducement on this score for the palming off of the latter's heads as those of its larger companions.

In connection with the facts revealed by these records it must be remembered that at this time the Weald was much more wooded than it is even to-day, and that probably vast acres of practically virgin forest still remained. There had doubtless been a considerable amount of clearing done in the vicinity of the town of Tenterden itself, commensurate with its growth and the increase of cultivation, as well as in its neighbourhood, for charcoal burning, for the supply of timber for its shipbuilding yards at Small Hythe and Reading Street on the near-by estuary of the Rother, and at a greater distance inland for the wealden iron foundries, but the villages and farms throughout the greater part of the Weald were still, for the most part, only isolated clearings in the forest; while roads were few and indifferent, and communication from one to another was effected mainly by forest tracks and bridle paths. There was, therefore, ample harbourage for these numbers of larger birds of prey close up to the town, and still more so in the more sparsely inhabited and denser forest inland.