

PNHS outing to Argaty Red Kite Centre, Doune, Stirlingshire

Sunday 16th April 2023

11 society members gathered in the car park of Argaty Red Kite Centre in the late morning, and were immediately greeted by the sight of Tree Sparrows (*Passer montanus*) and a few Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citronella*) in the surrounding trees. Nesting boxes are positioned close to the parking bays which allowed us great views of the tree sparrows busying themselves with the important duties of lining nests, and feeding from the stations positioned nearby. The tree sparrows were easy to identify owing to their distinctive full chestnut crown, nape and black cheek spot, unlike their cousins the House sparrow, where the males have a grey crown and no cheek spot. Tree sparrows have seen a sharp decline in since the 1970s to late 2000s, but there are signs of improvement in their numbers, and here at Argaty they seem to be thriving.



Argaty's Niall and Lynn greeting PNHS



Tree sparrow in nesting box



Tree sparrow with nesting material



Yellowhammer

Some of our group spotted a couple of red kites (*Milvus milvus*) in the skies high above the centre, circling in anticipation of their feeding later in the day. *Milvus* in latin translates as kite, aptly describing the way they seemed to hang in the sky. The weather conditions were favourable too, plenty of cloud cover, but overall it was a mild spring day.

We were greeted by our hosts for the day Niall and Lynn Bowser, owners of Argaty. Lynn guided us to the red squirrel hide located a short distance downhill from the visitor carpark. The hide was spacious enough to accommodate our large group and offered panoramic views of the woodland. A few strategically placed sections of dead trees positioned close to the hide windows allowed us to have close encounters with the visiting wildlife. Lynn put out a selection of peanuts and hazelnuts to entice the squirrels in, and advised us to look out for the green woodpecker; many visitors have been lucky enough to spot it, however, Lynn lamented that she hasn't seen it yet.



Red squirrel hide



Views from the red squirrel hide

Our group spent over an hour in the hide, during this time a couple of red squirrels made visits to the area to collect food, using both the baited areas and the wooden feeding boxes located on the trees. Niall later advised that the squirrels will typically lift a hazelnut and spend around 26 secs turning the nut over in its paws, assessing it for suitability in terms of weight, smell and size. During our visit the squirrels displayed some caching behaviour taking nuts from the tree stumps, before placing them in areas further back on the forest floor. Squirrels will often falsely cache nuts to deter other squirrels from taking their stash. As we advance further into spring, it was obvious that the red squirrels are in the middle of moulting and losing their thick winter coats; this made one of them look particularly dishevelled in this transient phase. We enjoyed some other visitors too including nuthatches.



Red squirrel assessing hazelnut



Red Squirrel



Nuthatch



Red kite hide viewing

After lunch we made our way to the red kite viewing hide further up in the grounds of Argaty, which is also a working livestock farm. Niall's chat about the history of red kites was informative and absorbing. The Argaty red kite project has been in operation for 20 years, working in close partnership with RSPB Scotland. The feeding of the kites takes place daily all year round, and the food consists mostly of offal. As a farmer, Niall is a shining example of best practice, showing how wildlife can coexist with modern farming methodologies. The persecution of the red kite had led to their extinction in most of the UK, however this award winning project, and others like it have seen kite numbers increase positively. A common misconception remains that kites will predate lambs and hare, however despite their imposing wingspan of almost 5ft, they are relatively light birds, weighing around the

equivalent of a bag of sugar. This renders them incapable of the heavy lifting seen in other raptor species.



Red kites swooping at feeding time



Red kite

Kites are scavengers, but will also eat small mammals, worms, beetles and other invertebrates. Kites are easily identifiable from their silhouette with their distinctive forked tail, russet coloured body and grey/white head; with females often around 5% larger than the males. We watched as around 12-15 birds gathered quickly, swooping and diving even while the food was being deposited on the grass meadow opposite our viewing hide.

At one point a heron appeared, and seemed fairly unfazed by the kites coming down to feed. At the time of our visit, lambing season had commenced, so the numbers of kites coming in drops as they will often feed on the afterbirth in the fields. Typically in the winter months, when alternative food sources are scarcer, the feeding numbers at Argaty will be in the 30 and 40s.



Grey heron and Red kite



Inside the red kite viewing hide with Niall from Argaty Red Kite Centre

Sightings during the day:

- Red squirrel
- Nuthatch
- Great spotted woodpecker
- Buzzard
- Dunnock
- Chaffinch
- Great tit
- Blue tit
- Coal tit
- Tree sparrow
- Yellowhammer
- Blackbird
- Red kite
- Jackdaw
- Robin
- Grey heron
- Collared dove

Kirsten Ferguson (report and photographs)