

Decline in the number of kestrels is worse in Scotland

Two thirds of Scotland's kestrels have vanished since 1995, according to a new report on the fortunes of UK birds.

The decline of the bird of prey is highlighted in the latest annual Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) report.

Once a familiar sight all over Scotland, hovering over roadside verges and fields searching for prey. But the latest official statistics show that between 1995 and 2022 the breeding population plummeted in Scotland by 67%.

While the species has declined throughout the UK, Scotland has been hit hardest, with the population in England suffering a 26% drop.

It is not clear why the decline in Scotland is more severe than elsewhere in the UK, although the report notes that rodenticide use has been implicated in its decline across the UK.

Dr James Heywood, BBS National Organiser, said: "The kestrel is one of the nation's favourite birds. They are so charismatic and they are unique because they hover – you can almost look them in the eye.

"Kestrels have declined all over the UK. Many people would agree that, even driving around, their decline is noticeable.

"It may have been hit harder in Scotland than in England

because the density of kestrels is lower in Scotland. It only needs one population centre to be hit in a particularly bad way and it has a big effect over the whole population.”

Dr Heywood said that while further work was required to establish a causal link between the use of rodenticides and the decline in kestrels, the species could be suffering from a decline in its prey due to landscape change.

He added: “Kestrel numbers are very variable year on year. One of the reasons for that is that their main prey of field voles is also very variable and goes through boom and bust cycles, but that would only explain year on year changes. The real concern is the long term downward trend we are seeing. What we don't know is whether vole numbers are slowly declining.”

Kestrels are easily distinguished by their pointed wings and long tail, and ability to hover while looking for small mammals to eat.

They should be found all year round in a wide variety of habitats, from moors and heaths to farmland, and are also adapted to survive in cities.

The BBS is a partnership project between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

The latest report reveals that while some birds such as goldfinch, great spotted woodpecker and long-tailed tit are faring reasonably well in Scotland, others including the kestrel, swift, curlew, greenfinch and lapwing are in steep decline.

Dr Paul Walton, RSPB Scotland's Head of Habitats and Species, said: “The BBS provides a truly vital assessment of our common and widespread terrestrial breeding birds. In a rapidly changing world, the importance of this work cannot be overstated.”



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