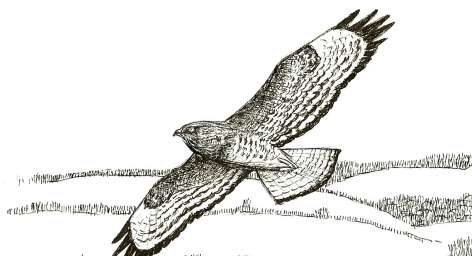


THE COMMON BUZZARD IN KENT AN UPDATE

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Common Buzzard by Phil Lightman

Once a common resident breeding species, the Common Buzzard probably became extinct as a breeding species in the early part of the 19th Century. The species remained a regular Autumn migrant, with occasionally large numbers staying to winter. Following such an influx in November 1870, eight Buzzards were trapped on the adjoining Godmersham Park and Chilham Castle estates. A further 12-15 birds were present on an estate at Cobham, while 19 were killed within a two mile radius of Canterbury. Those not shot or trapped had departed by April 1871. (Ticehurst 1909) Before 1950 the Buzzard appears to have become much rarer in the county, with no satisfactory reports of the species in forty years on the North Kent Marshes (Gillham & Homes 1950) By the 1950's Buzzards were more frequent visitors, especially to areas of downland, and there was some speculation that the species was in fact breeding in the county (KBR 1958). The combination of myxomatosis in the rabbit population and the effects of pesticide poisoning in the early 1960's caused a retraction in the Common Buzzard's British range, and records in Kent became fewer, with only two records in 1961.

COMMON BUZZARD POPULATION IN KENT 1998-2007

1998	1 Pair present in West Kent
1999	1 Pair bred in West Kent
2000	5 Pairs present
2001	4-5 breeding pairs, plus 10-12 other birds present.
2002	10 territorial pairs
2003	17+ territorial pairs (10 pairs confirmed breeding)
2004	24 territorial pairs (9 pairs confirmed breeding)
2005	50 pairs present (estimate)
2006	100-200 pairs present (estimate)
2007	300-500 pairs present (estimate)

The 1968-72 and 1988-91 BTO Atlases illustrated that Buzzards were making little progress from their heartlands in Western and Northern Britain. However, in the 1990's Buzzards started a rapid spread into the Eastern counties of England and Scotland (Clements 2000). Although a pair was present at a site in West Kent in 1998, breeding was not confirmed until 1999. In 2000, three breeding pairs were also discovered in East Kent. Since then, the population has increased dramatically, with more than twenty pairs present in Spring 2004, and numerous non-breeding, presumably immature, birds present. By 2005, there were too many pairs present for an accurate count, so an estimate was based on density found in specific sample study areas. This increase certainly exceeds what could be expected from normal reproduction rates and presumably reflects continued recruitment from the much increased breeding populations further West. The current (2007) Kent population numbers probably more than three hundred territorial pairs, with the largest concentration present on the North Downs. As shown in fig 1, currently Common Buzzards are present in approximately 1000 sq. kms. of the county, with the highest density occurring on approx. 200 sq. kms of the North Downs between Hollingbourne and Challock. The lower density area comprises two bands of well-wooded farmland, one along the Weald from the Surrey border to Tenterden, the other broadly following the North Downs almost to the coast at Dover. Some areas of suitable habitat such as the Canterbury Ring Woods and the Ham Street Woods, south of Ashford, remain as yet largely unoccupied.

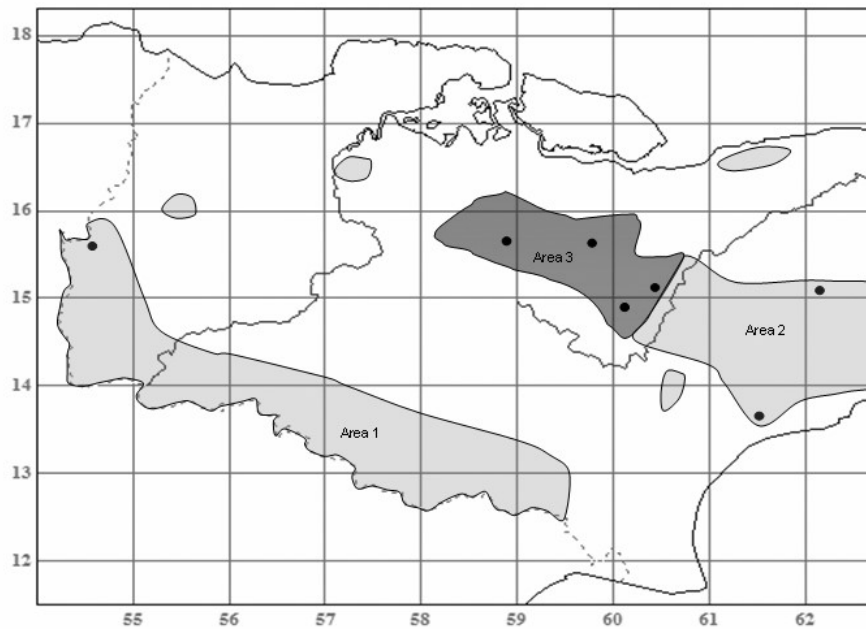


Fig 1. Common Buzzard Distribution in Kent 2007.

I have monitored a study area of 35 sq. kms. on the North Downs to the south of Sittingbourne since the first colonising pair bred in 2001. There were 18 pairs in 2006, increasing to 32 pairs in April 2007 (Fig 2.) Of these, 24 pairs bred successfully, producing fledged young, while four pairs were either unsuccessful or did not attempt to breed. Four further pairs had disappeared by July, either through natural dispersal or through human intervention. A further four pairs were present by July, either new arrivals or relocating failed breeders. Most pairs are located approximately 1 km apart, with much room for further expansion of numbers.

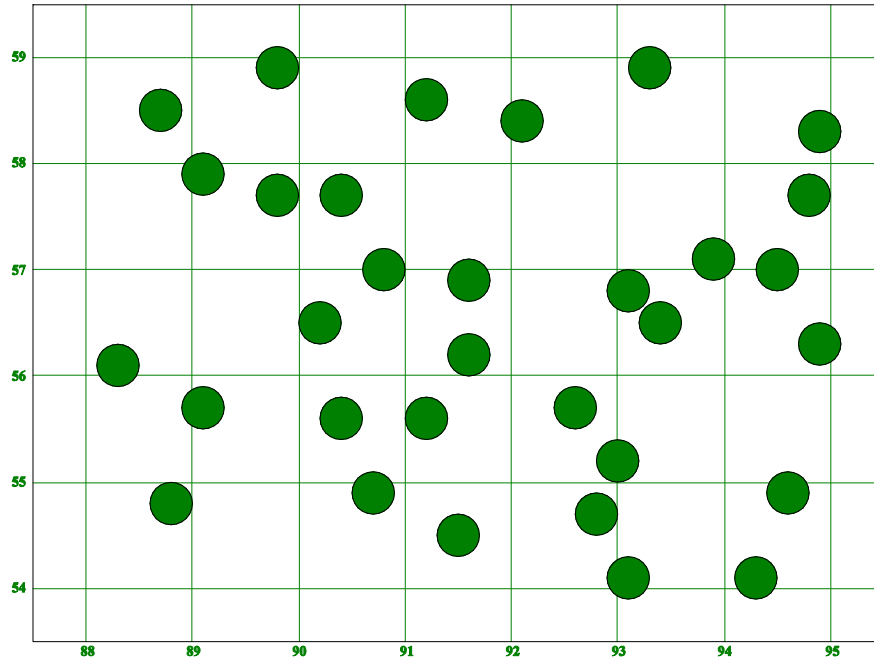


Fig 2: Common Buzzard – Territorial pairs in 35 sq.kms North Downs Study Area.

Preferred habitat is mixed farmland with numerous blocks of both deciduous and conifer woodland. Areas of parkland, with their mature trees and undisturbed hunting opportunities are particularly attractive to these colonists. Further expansion obviously depends on freedom from both direct persecution and mortality due to the use of poisoned bait intended for other species (corvids, foxes, rats etc). Fortunately, so far most keepers and land-owners appear to welcome this spectacular

addition to the county avifauna. From casual observation, most prey items taken by Kentish Buzzards appear to be rabbits or smaller mammals, sometimes picked up dead from the roadside.

Assuming an average of twenty territorial pairs per hectad (100 sq. kms) throughout the low density area, and seventy-five pairs per hectad in the main concentration on the North Downs gives a total of more than three hundred territorial pairs. If the assumed twenty pairs per hectad in the low density area is already too low, there may be as many as five hundred territorial pairs currently in Kent.

Common Buzzards in similar habitat in Western England have reached very high densities with 93 territorial pairs in a study area of 75 sq.kms near Bristol recorded in 2007 (R.Prytherch pers comm.) In the absence of significant human persecution, it is likely that the Common Buzzard will reach a population of 1000 or more territorial pairs in Kent within ten years, and possibly eventually replace the Kestrel as Kent's most populous diurnal raptor.

References:

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Gillham E H & Homes R C. 1950 *Birds of the North Kent Marshes*. Collins

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