



# Jules Hudson

## COUNTRY ESCAPE

While Jules is heartened to see the once endangered red kite is again flying high in Wales, he's shocked to discover another bird of prey is not faring as well

**W**hen I first came to Mid Wales 25 years ago, the plight of the red kite was the conservation story of the moment. Just six breeding pairs were all that stood in the way of almost certain extinction from the skies above the Cambrians. Upon the wings of this tiny but resilient bunch rested the fate of the red kite in Wales, whilst a similar number were also struggling for survival in Oxfordshire. If you were lucky enough to spot one, you'd race off to tell your friends and neighbours.

Fast forward two decades and the remarkable reversal in the kite's fortunes shines as a beacon of hope for similar projects nationwide, thanks to the stalwart efforts of conservation groups and farsighted landowners. Living as I then did near Tregaron, I marvelled as the numbers in the skies above steadily grew. Several kite feeding points were set up, but without doubt the most famous is on the other side of the Cambrians near Rhayader, at Gigrin Farm. Last week a visit there for TV's *Countryfile* gave me the chance to meet some of my wildlife heroes.

Gigrin is typical of many upland farms clustered over the mountains around Rhayader, with one major exception. For the now swollen numbers of kites that call this area home, it's the equivalent of MacDonald's. Every afternoon, just as they have for the past 23 years, Chris Powell and his family feed them. What started as a way of encouraging just one or two that were spotted feeding on dead rabbits, has today become not only a major local tourist attraction, but a jewel in the red kite conservation crown. For Chris this unexpected way of life began with a simple effort to recognise the kite's immediate peril and, crucially, to do something about it. As he and I shovelled offal out across the feeding field, the bright blue skies above us began to darken; upwards of 400 birds were gathering, gracefully and patiently circling above us, waiting for a crow to swoop and signal the start of their daily feeding frenzy.

By the early 1990s, the Powells' efforts had attracted the attention of the RSPB. They asked for a meeting and Chris went expecting a telling off for meddling with an endangered species, but his fears couldn't have been more misjudged. Since then, his commitment to the raptors has had the full support

of the authorities. As I watched these majestic birds swoop and soar, I felt genuinely moved that over my lifetime I'd witnessed such a dramatic comeback.

Just a few miles away, meanwhile, the plight of another species has attracted renewed conservation efforts. On the south side of the Dyfi Estuary, I met up with Janine Pannett and Emyr Evans at the Cors Dyfi Nature Reserve, home now to the Dyfi Osprey Project (featured in the June issue of sister title *Welsh Coastal Life*). I must confess, I'd always assumed the osprey was thriving. It litters literature and artwork down the centuries, and seems as well known as the robin or the swallow. Yet in truth, despite populations elsewhere, here in Wales there are just four pairs determinedly hanging on after persecution by fisherman (to remove the natural competition), hunters and egg collectors. Yet the casual disregard for the osprey in recent years is at odds with its place in Welsh culture. Ospreys appear on Swansea's coat of arms, in the *Mabinogion* and give their name to a rugby team.

Unlike Chris Powell's kites, the project's ospreys all have names, and chief among them is Monty. I watched him through my binoculars and later in fine detail thanks to hi-tech cameras that monitor his tiny family. This year they've bred again, and the chicks we marvelled at will soon be ready to travel south to West Africa. This winter Safari is a far cry from the blustery Dyfi where they were born, and where it's hoped they'll return to breed themselves.

As we discussed the challenges facing ospreys, I was inspired to hope for the best. The Dyfi ospreys are of comparable number to kites 25 years ago, but as the kite's story has shown, decline does not have to point to an inevitable outcome. Ospreys do need our help but, for a species that makes light work of an annual round-trip to Africa, if we can leave them to do what they've done for thousands of years, who knows, they may yet become a familiar sight once again in the skies above Wales. 🦅

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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