

Raptors of the Park

by Nigel Jackman

As a group of bird enthusiasts tracked three buzzards wheeling high in the sky above Pen Ponds car park, a visitor asked them whether there were golden eagles in Richmond Park. The following week a single buzzard soaring over the same location prompted another bystander to ask whether it was an eagle.

Many raptors are seen over Richmond Park, most often kestrels and sparrowhawks which are both resident here throughout the year. However, eagles are only seen extremely rarely in England and these are presumably strays – our last resident golden eagle was in the Lake District until 2015 and is now presumed dead.

The kestrel is the Park's most common raptor, producing broods of up to five young. It is often seen hovering with tail fanned and wings beating rapidly as it hunts. Kestrels feed on small rodents, insects and worms, but will also take birds such as larks and pipits.

The sparrowhawk, secretive and usually solitary, feeds on small birds. The female is larger and accordingly will often take somewhat larger birds. Clutches are of two or three eggs.

Common buzzards are also now seen regularly in or over the Park where it seems a few may be resident and have attempted recently to breed. Another large bird that is becoming an increasingly common sight in the sky overhead is the red kite with its distinctive forked tail, but as yet it is not locally resident.



*Hovering kestrel hunting for prey
by Nigel Jackman*

Raptors occasionally seen in Richmond Park include the peregrine falcon, seen in any season, and the hobby which over-winters in Africa and is sometimes seen hunting dragonflies or other insects over Pen Ponds. Rarely an osprey may be seen flying over the Park on its way to or from West Africa where it over-winters.

Extreme rarities are (with the numbers of reported sightings in the Park in the past 10 years): marsh harriers 5, hen harrier 1, Montagu's harrier 1, rough-legged buzzard 1, honey buzzard 6; merlin 1.

Quite exceptionally, *A History of Richmond New Park* (1877) ascribed to John Lucas, says "a very large eagle was shot in Richmond Park on 14th November 1842". In his book *A History of Richmond Park* (1937), C. L. Collenette states that it was most likely a white-tailed eagle.

So, in the unlikely event that you should see an eagle in Richmond Park, you should probably ask yourself which zoo or collection it might have escaped from.