

MEDIA RELEASE

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RED KITE RESEARCH WINS FIRST WATSON RAPTOR SCIENCE PRIZE

Illegal killing may be limiting the red kite population in Northern Scotland according to research recognised by a prestigious new award.

Described as ‘an exemplary piece of scientific work’ by an independent panel of scientific judges, the research paper is the first winner of the Watson Raptor Science Prize in memory of two of Scotland’s most renowned ornithologists, Donald Watson and his son Jeff.

Led by RSPB Scientists, the paper **‘Illegal killing slows population recovery of a re-introduced raptor of high conservation concern – The red kite *Milvus milvus*’**, compared the fortunes of red kites in Northern Scotland with those in the Chilterns. Despite being reintroduced at similar times, the Scottish population was being severely limited by illegal killing.

Professor Roger Crofts, Director for the Watson Bird Centre and Celebration Project based at St John’s Town of Dalry in Galloway, Scotland, said:

“Our project is multi faceted linking birds and landscape, arts and nature. The Prize reflects the contributions made by the unique father and son combination of Donald and Jeff Watson to raptor studies. I am delighted that an RSPB team has passed the test of three independent internationally renowned scientists to win the first award. I hope that many will join us to hear their presentation on Saturday 1 October in Dalry Town Hall, as well as read this seminal paper.”

Responding to the announcement, Donald and Jeff’s family said: “The Watson family are delighted that this new award recognises excellence in the field of raptor science, an area of study that was so important in the lives of both Donald and Jeff. We thank everyone who has worked so hard to set up the award, and offer our congratulations to the winners of the inaugural prize.”

On behalf of his Watson Raptor Science Prize Panel colleagues, Professors Ian Newton and Steve Redpath, Professor Des Thompson stated that: "Some outstanding scientific papers were published on birds of prey in 2010. However, Dr

Jennifer Smart and co-workers have published an exemplary piece of scientific work which pinpoints the key limiting factor for a reintroduced red kite population in the north of Scotland. It is especially fitting that this study should have been carried out in the late Jeff Watson's home area - where he played an important part in supporting the reintroduction programme. We also pay tribute to one of the co-authors, Brian Etheridge, who has made an exceptional contribution to raptor monitoring and conservation in Britain. "

Speaking on behalf of the co-authors, Professor Jeremy Wilson, Head of Research for RSPB Scotland added: "This paper brings to fruition long-term work by RSPB staff dedicated to monitoring red kite populations and to ensuring that conservation action is founded upon the best available scientific evidence. It is a great honour to be awarded the inaugural Watson Raptor Science Prize. We are grateful to the judges for their recognition of our work. We thank many individuals who have contributed observations of red kites and allowed access to land, and to Scottish Natural Heritage which funded this work and continue to fund red kite conservation programmes across Scotland"

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

- The award is for a paper on raptor science published in an internationally peer reviewed journal in 2010.
- It represents excellence in raptor science as judged by an independent panel comprising three outstanding ornithological scientists: Professors Ian Newton, Des Thompson and Steve Redpath.
- **Layman's summary of the paper**
Illegal killing slows population recovery of a re-introduced raptor of high conservation concern – The red kite *Milvus milvus* *Biological Conservation (2010). 143 (5): 1278-1286*.
The reintroduction of Red Kites to the UK has been a phenomenal success story. However, not all populations have increased at the same rate. For example, the North of Scotland population reached barely 50 pairs after 17 years, compared to around 300 pairs in the Chilterns where habitats are broadly similar. Clearly, something was limiting the North of Scotland kites and this study aimed to identify the causes. Breeding success was high, but survival from one year to the next was low compared to other populations. Forty percent of red kites found dead were killed illegally. The authors estimate that, if there had been no illegal killing, the population in the North of Scotland would have grown at the same rate as in the Chilterns. They conclude that illegal killing is limiting population growth. The key challenge facing government is to find a way to eliminate this killing; steps are now in hand to tackle this problem.
- **The authors of the award winning paper are**
Dr Jennifer Smart, Senior Conservation Scientist RSPB; Dr Arjun Amar Senior Lecturer, Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town; Dr Innes Sim, Conservation Scientist RSPB Scotland; Brian Etheridge, Raptor Monitoring Officer, RSPB Scotland; Duncan Cameron, former Red Kite Officer RSPB, now Field Ecologist with Natural Research Ltd; George Christie, Red Kite Project Officer, RSPB Scotland; and Professor Jeremy Wilson, Head of Conservation Science RSPB Scotland;