

The kites

by Silvia Sgrosso

Among the species of rapacious birds more easily sighted in Grumento Nova area there are the [Red Kite \(*Milvus milvus*\)](#) and [Black Kite \(*Milvus migrans*\)](#). The whole area of Basilicata plays a very important role for the populations of these two birds of prey.



The red kite

- Class *Aves*
- Order *Falconiformes*
- Family *Accipitridae*
- Genus *Milvus*
- Species *Milvus milvus*

The red kite is a diurnal bird of prey with a wingspan of 160-170 cm, weight of about 1 kg, reddish color with some whitish spots on the underside of the wings and streaked head, whitish. The two sexes are morphologically similar and differ only in size, with the female a little bigger than male; however this difference is not perceptible on the field.

A peculiar hallmark of this species is the **distinctive tail, reddish brown, deeply forked**; the young individuals show a paler color and the tail is less forked.

The red kite attends preferably hilly areas characterized by the alternation of wooded areas and open spaces; for hunting prefers open spaces with low vegetation on which circles above or glides slowly in search of quarries. It is an [omnivorous](#) species that mainly feeds on carrions, small mammals, small birds and reptiles. It nests on trees, often oaks such as Roverella or Cerro and sometimes can use abandoned nests of ravens.

In Italy are estimated 300-400 breeding pairs to which are added an unknown number of individuals wintering from breeding areas of center and north Europe (mainly Germany and Switzerland, where breeds most of the European population).

Once the red kite was very common (Savi 1827) in our country but throughout the twentieth century has been gradually disappearing, becoming a **rare species and localized just in some areas of the center-south**.

Basilicata is the stronghold of Italian red kites, with over half of the national population (Sigismondi et al., 2006). This year has been made the second census of wintering red kites and Basilicata was the region leader of an initiative carried out at national level. In the census of 2011 were monitored 14 dorms and counted about 700 individuals with a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 160 specimens, while in 2012 were surveyed over 900 individuals in 17 dormitories, representing 65% of the whole national contingent (Fulco , pers. comm.).

The black kite

- Class *Aves*
- Order *Falconiformes*
- Family *Accipitridae*
- Genus *Milvus*
- Species *Milvus migrans*

The black kite, as far as similar to the red kite, is slightly smaller and it is distinguished mainly by **the tail that is less deeply forked and the darker plumage, with a gray head**. The two sexes are morphologically similar.

As its name says it's a migratory bird present **in Italy from March to October** when it moves into North Africa, result interesting data coming from recent winter monitoring carried out in Basilicata during which were counted 17 black kites, considered irregular wintering for Basilicata (Fulco et al., 2008). This species migrates both individually and in groups, also numerous,

sometimes associated with other species and even in adverse weather conditions.

The flight is quite similar to that one of the red kite with circles and glides to spot their quarry, often it has a gregarious behavior. It nests, sometimes in colonies, on trees and can use abandoned nests of carrion-crows that repairs from year to year.

The black kite is omnivorous and feeds on small mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, carrions, garbage, but near wetlands seems to be a skilled fisherman.

This species can be found in **hilly or plain areas** and prefers wetlands **near lakes or rivers** in areas with woods or scattered trees. The area of Grumento Nova, therefore, with the abundance of wetlands appears to be particularly suitable for this species.

The habit of eating carrions makes these raptors vulnerable, like other necrophagous birds, to the ingestion of poisoned bait illegally used for the control of other species considered harmful or to the accumulation of pollutants that cause the death of small rodents or other animals that are feeds for the kites. In addition, poaching, a bad management of forest habitats, the disappearance of extensive agriculture and sheep farming and other environmental changes are all factors that **stake the populations of these raptors**. The spread of wind power stations, finally, seems to be a threat both because the birds are killed by the impact with the blades and because they are often built in ridge areas that are hunting environments for kites and lead to a reduction and fragmentation of *habitats* of these species.

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