

BRITISH BIRDS OF PREY

On 4 April 2019, the British Royal Mail issued a set of ten First Class stamps depicting photographs of various birds of prey native to the United Kingdom. Each bird was individually photographed by well-known and leading British animal photographer, Tim Flach, at the International Centre for Birds of Prey.



Included in the set are: White-tailed Eagle, Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Merlin, Golden Eagle, Kestrel, Goshawk, Hobby, Red Kite, and Peregrine Falcon. Birds of prey are also known as “raptors.”

The stamps and a range of collectible products are available on general sale from www.royalmail.com/birdsofprey.

British photographer, Tim Flach, who specializes in animal photography, has captured the exquisite beauty of the birds in a mix of close-up shots and the majestic sight of them in flight. He said of working with Royal Mail, “It’s always very special to be invited to work on a set of stamps.

“I think it’s great that Royal Mail has chosen to put a focus on the birds of prey that we have in the UK. I’m really mindful of the fact that we’ve never been more separated from nature. And, the stamps really let us better understand what these animals are. It’s never been more important for us to think about the natural world.”

Royal Mail also worked with Jemima Parry-Jones MBE, Director of the International Centre for Birds of Prey, conservationist, established author, and leading British authority on birds of prey.

She said of the stamps, “Look at the stamps, enjoy the stamps, see if you can recognize those birds that you might see in your garden—like a Sparrowhawk or a Kestrel or a Buzzard sitting on a telegraph pole. See if you can recognize them from the stamps—that would be a huge step forward.”

Philip Parker, Royal Mail, said, “Our birds of prey are masters of the skies. Tim Flach’s photography for our stamps captures their beauty and character in extraordinary detail.”

The defining characteristic of birds of prey is that they are carnivores. Various birds eat meat, but only raptors catch and carry their food with their feet and have such exceptionally good binocular vision.

The diurnal birds of prey present in the UK are divided into several groups: eagles, true hawks, falcons, buzzards, kites, harriers, and the osprey.

The eagles are the Golden Eagle, a member of the booted eagle family, and the White-tailed Eagle, a member of the fish or sea-eagle family. Both are very large birds of prey, with the latter being the bigger of the two. In the UK, both are found in the more remote areas of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

There are two true hawks of the genus *Accipiter*: the Goshawk and the Sparrowhawk. These are forest species, with a short and very agile sprinting flight to catch their prey. Both have long tails and short rounded wings. Their yellow eyes turn orange and with age may even end up red.

The best-known falcon is the Peregrine. The others are the Kestrel (also known as the Windhover), the Merlin (the smallest British bird of prey), and the Hobby, present in the UK only in the summer, to breed.

The largest bird in the kite family, the Red Kite, is the only kite present in the UK and can now be seen in many places thanks to reintroductions and releases.

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)

This very large eagle catches fish or sea birds with a low, slow approach, dropping its feet into the water to snatch the prey and then taking it to shore. These eagles were persecuted to extinction by 1918, but in 1975, a release program was started on Rùm in Scotland. The population in Scotland is now around 60 breeding pairs, with more than 200 adult birds.

BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*)

By the 1970s, the Common (or Eurasian) Buzzard was rare in the UK other than in the far west. Since then, however, there has been a huge increase thanks to more nesting areas and to rabbits surviving myxomatosis, and buzzards are now breeding in every county. Buzzards are usually seen on fine days soaring and calling, with a mewling cry, or sitting on poles, on fences by roads, or on the ground, particularly when ploughed in the winter. They scavenge roadkill, which can cause them traffic injuries, or feed on insects on the ground. There is enormous color variation in this species, from almost all cream to very dark brown.

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*)

The Merlin, which belongs to the falcon family, is the smallest UK raptor and can be found during the spring and summer on the uplands, nesting on the ground underneath heather. A specialist bird-catcher, it feeds its young on larks and meadow pipits in the summer. Females are brown, as are juveniles, while adult males have a blue-grey back. After the autumn arrives, these birds move to lowlands, in a partial migration, for the winter. Since Merlins are fast, agile, and small, they are not commonly seen, but energetic young make a spectacular ringing flight after larks.

GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*)

This aggressive, forest-dwelling hunter was probably extinct as a breeder until the middle of the 20th century. Its wing shape allows it to twist and turn through trees, and its long legs and powerful feet are well suited to hunting birds and mammals up to the size of a hare, with a short, often surprise attack. Adults are grey and white, with fine horizontal bars on the breast, while juveniles are brown, with vertical brown stripes. Goshawks build large stick nests and lay up to four eggs. The parents are vocal in the spring, when they can sometimes be seen soaring high in good weather.

SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*)

This little hawk is most commonly seen in gardens catching small birds. Its defining features are very long, thin legs and yellow eyes. Males are tiny in comparison to females. Both hunt birds, but females can take birds up to the size of a pigeon. The Sparrowhawk is often blamed, wrongly, for the demise of small birds, while in fact it is cats, cars, windows, and pesticides that are responsible. Sparrowhawks build a stick nest and rear up to five young. The young grow swiftly and become independent by the age of 14 weeks, although only about a third survive their first year.

HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*)

Larger than the merlin, this little falcon migrates to the UK from Africa in the spring to breed. With its long, sickle-shaped wings, it resembles a giant swift and is incredibly nimble in flight. Feeding on dragonflies and other insects, the hobby is often seen near large bodies of water. It nests using abandoned crows' nests, and during the breeding season it hunts for swallows and swifts to feed its young. After the young are able to fly and can hunt for themselves, Hobbies migrate with the swallows back to Africa.

KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Once the UK's most common raptor, observed hovering by roads and motorways, this falcon has seen a decrease of 40 percent over the past two decades. A key reason for the decline is the lack of sufficient nest sites and suitable grasslands for hunting. Kestrels are characterized by a beautiful chestnut-red color over their bodies. The female has a red tail with bars, while the adult male has a grey head and grey tail with a black band at its tip. These birds are best known for hunting mice and voles by hovering, often descending in stages to drop on their prey.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*)

By 1903, Red Kites had been persecuted close to extinction, with the last few remaining in the mountains of Wales, when a farmer started to feed them. Now, with four feeding stations, there are 900 pairs in Wales. There have been very successful translocation programs in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, so kites are now seen soaring together in many places. Long wings, a long, forked tail, and red color make the Red Kite easy to identify. These birds are mainly scavengers, feeding on roadkill and animal remains. They have small feet for their body size, which limits the prey they can catch.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

The Golden Eagle prefers remote moorlands and mountains in Scotland, usually nesting on cliff ledges. It soars over the Highlands, catching rabbits, hares, and birds with its very powerful feet. It also consumes carrion, in some areas being reliant on dead animals during the winter. Golden Eagles pair for life. Of the two eggs that the female lays, one chick rarely survives, the other fledging at about three-and-a-half months. Juveniles have a mottled white and brown tail with a black band, which turns brown over the years. The golden feathers that give this eagle its name are on the head and the neck.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*)

Brought to low numbers by pesticides in the middle of the 20th century, the Peregrine has recovered dramatically. Many Peregrines are now urban birds, nesting on cathedrals, other tall buildings, and bridges. Probably the fastest living creature, the Peregrine hunts birds up to the size of large gulls, almost always on the wing. It has a short tail and long, pointed wings. The juveniles are brown, while the adults have a grey-blue back. In the UK, these birds are sedentary, but Peregrines in other areas can be migratory, and they are the most widely spread raptors worldwide.