

## Birds of Prey in the U.K. and Europe

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The term 'birds of prey' is usually taken to mean those birds that capture prey that is large in proportion to their own size, such as other birds, mammals, reptiles or fish, and have feet and claws developed into talons to perform this task. Also known as 'raptors', meaning 'to seize and carry away', most species also have the intimidating hooked bill for tearing up the food. Both eyes are directed forward to give binocular vision to judge speed and distance accurately, and are renowned for their acuity, being many times better than humans. As the eyes tend to be fixed in their sockets, all round vision is achieved by using the extremely flexible neck, which can often rotate beyond 200 degrees.

The group including falcons, hawks, eagles and vultures are known as Falconiformes, and are mostly diurnal (active during the day). The owls, mainly nocturnal, are grouped in a separate Order, the Strigiformes, as their similar features have evolved independently. They have many different physical characteristics that show they are not closely related.

### Owls.

Five species of owl can be seen in the U.K., though it is thought that the **Little owl** was introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This owl is only 5 inches in height, and lives mainly on the ground in open woodland, hunting for insects and worms, with the occasional small bird. It likes to nest in hollow trees and walls. It is very common in France, often seen in daylight, sitting on fence-posts.

Most commonly seen in the open is the light coloured **Barn owl**, which is now making a comeback after its habitat was reduced by barn-conversions and intensive farming. Its diet comprises mice and other rodents with some insects, which it catches using its silent flight and exceptional hearing. The ears are placed asymmetrically, one ear being higher than the other on either side of its head, to assist vertical and lateral location of prey. The facial disc acts as an amplifier, gathering in the sound and focusing it on the ears. Barn owls are often seen at dawn and dusk quartering the fields and hedges, and its silent flight through churchyards has given rise to many a ghost story! It is known as 'La Dame Blanche' in France.



Tawny owl.

Our woodland owl is the **Tawny**, with its well known distinctive call, and rusty brown plumage. Also to be found in thick woodland is the tree-dwelling **Long eared owl**, which is a master of camouflage, despite its striking orange-yellow eyes. The ear tufts are not ears but feathers, which may help with changing its outline, but may also be for communication with other owls. The **Short eared owl** has tufts often laid back against its head, and spends a lot of time on the ground.

Owls regurgitate pellets, which contain undigested bits of food, such as bone, fur and feathers, and these can prove most useful to tell us about their diet. They do not have a crop, which in the other birds of prey is where the food is stored before being digested.

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### Falcons.

The shape and features of this group enables it to contain the fastest moving living things on the planet. They have large powerful feet, which they use to stun or catch their prey, mainly in the air. Falcons kill their prey by biting, usually at the base of the neck, using a projection on the upper beak known as a 'tomial tooth', which fits into a notch in the lower. Their wings are long and pointed with rigid feathers, and their shape is extremely streamlined. They have dark eyes with a third transparent eyelid called the nictitating membrane, which cleans and protects the eye. Their nostrils are set in the fleshy area above the beak known as the cere, and contain a spiral, which enables air to be taken in at high speed. The female's body is often a lot larger than the male's.



The **Peregrine** is the largest and best known in Britain, with its black to silver back and wings with light striped underside, and is found throughout the world. It became almost extinct in the middle of the last century in this country, due to the use of insecticides damaging the eggs and poisoning the adults, and persecution by gamekeepers and sportsmen. It is at last beginning to make a comeback thanks to a greater understanding and the preservation of its environment, notably along the East Sussex coast, where several pairs have recently begun nesting and rearing young. It is capable of descending on its prey in a dive (or stoop) of 150-180 mph, which makes it a great favourite of falconers.



The smaller **Common Kestrel** is seen much more frequently, often hovering over the verge of road or motorway: indeed, it is the only falcon capable of doing this. It is one of the few to show a difference between male and female plumage, with the male displaying a grey head and tail, while the female is a more even chestnut. The diet is varied, with small mammals such as voles, and insects forming the major part. Its sight is unusual in that it can detect ultraviolet, present in the urine of voles, which it can locate while hovering.

The **Merlin** is the smallest falcon, and again, the males differ from the females in having a slate-blue plumage on the back to the females' dark brown. Its diet mainly consists of small birds. It is becoming quite rare through loss of breeding habitat. The **Hobby** is a smaller version of the Peregrine in colour, but with dark orange thighs. It is very fast, pursuing swallows, swifts, insects

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and even bats, and can be seen catching dragonflies over ponds. In the winter, it migrates to Africa.

Captive-bred falcons from other parts of the world make excellent birds for Falconry. Among these can be seen the **Lanner**, a native of the African continent, with its russet head, silver-brown back, and dark heart-shaped dots on its cream front. The **Saker** comes from the Middle East, and is used by Arab falconers to hunt the Houbara bustard in the desert. Its plumage varies from light or dark brown, to a striking pale cream. Great care has to be taken when flying them free in Europe, as it is migratory, and in the spring, it can disappear to return to the Ural Mountains, where it normally breeds. The largest falcon, the **Gyrfalcon**, is more rarely used, as it needs to take (catch) large game such as grouse, and is hard to train. The wild rugged places of Northern Europe form its natural habitat.

### Accipitridae: Hawks, Eagles and Kites.

This group forms the largest family. They have a light coloured eye, and shorter, broad wings, often showing their primary feathers spread like fingers in flight. Their prey often includes ground-dwelling animals as well as birds, and can include carrion. Their pattern of flight reflects their manoeuvrability, moving fast through trees and bushes, and seizing their prey to subdue it on the ground.



The most common large hawk seen mostly on the west side of Britain and all over France is the **Common Buzzard**. Its mewing cry as it soars is evocative of Europe's wild places. It prefers open country with small woods and takes a wide variety of ground-living prey. The **Harriers**, (**Hen and Montague's**), are much less common, long winged and long tailed with slow flight over wetlands, searching for frogs, rabbits and insects

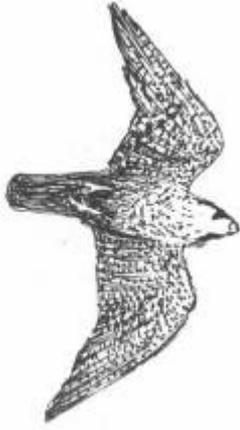
The rare **Goshawk**, and its smaller, more common cousin the **Sparrowhawk**, are both native to woodland, though the latter is now more commonly seen in farmland and gardens. Both have blue-grey back and wings and a pale front with fine horizontal bars. They hunt fast and low through bushes and trees taking small birds by surprise. Goshawks will also take rabbit, duck, moorhen, squirrel, stoat, pigeon, and many other species.

Scotland is the only place in the U.K. where the **Golden Eagle** can be found, with its eyrie (or nest) high on a rocky crag. Classified as a 'broad wing', it has an impressive soaring flight, and feeds on small mammals and game birds. The **White tailed Sea Eagle** has also been reported over the sea lochs on the west coast. **Booted Eagles** can be seen over the Dordogne.

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Having been much persecuted for centuries, the **Red Kite** became extinct in the U.K. until a recent release program has returned them to Wales, the Cotswolds and Sussex. This distinctive bird, with its dark red plumage and very long deeply forked tail, hunts rodents, frogs, lizards and insects over open ground. It will also eat carrion, which may again prove its downfall, as gamekeepers lay out poisoned carcasses to kill unwanted predators.



Falcon's wing shape



Hawk's wing shape



Red Kite

Both Red and **Black Kites** are a common sight in France.

A notable summer migrant to the UK is the **Osprey**, a raptor in a family of its own. It has recently begun to nest and rear young in Scotland and, for the first time in 2001, in the Lake District, and on Rutland Water. It lives almost entirely on fish, which it catches by plunging feet first into the water, then carrying it away held head-forward in its feet. It is seen migrating over France in the spring and autumn.



European Eagle Owl

The **European Eagle Owl** is no longer to be found in the U.K., as its habitat and food source of large rodents and birds have largely disappeared. The last one was seen a half century ago in Scotland. They still inhabit the wilder parts of Europe and Asia across a wide variety of habitats. There are some twelve species of Eagle Owl throughout the world, where they are the nocturnal equivalent of the eagles and buzzards. Eagle owls are typical 'perch and pounce' hunters that sit and watch for their prey from a raised vantage point, and pounce on it from above. Happily, many Bird of Prey collections keep Eagle Owls where visitors can still appreciate their magnificent orange eyes and huge powerful feet. They are appropriately known as 'Le Grand Duc' in France.