

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus*

This striking and unmistakable raptor is distinguished by its captivating aerial grace. Though relatively few in number, Swallow-tailed Kites may be quite conspicuous in the scattered areas where they occur, due to their tendency to nest in loose colonies and gather in large aggregations to forage and roost. They breed from Mexico to South America and also in the southeastern United States.

Habitat. The Swallow-tailed Kite forages in a diverse array of vegetation types that support large numbers of small arboreal vertebrates and large flying insects. Habitats include: swamp and floodplain forests; mixed stands of conifers and hardwoods; the margins of rivers, streams, and lakes; hardwood hammocks; bayheads; sloughs; and mangroves. The breeding season diet consists of insects, anoles, frogs, snakes, nestling songbirds, and a small number of mammals. Insects are the mainstay of fledged juveniles and adults that are not feeding young (Snyder 1974; Robertson 1988; Meyer and Collopy 1990; Meyer 1995).



Illustration © 1995 Diane Pierce, All Rights Reserved.

Nests are built mainly in pine and cypress trees that emerge above the canopy of fairly open stands. In Dade and Monroe counties, the exotic Australian pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) is used, but such nests fail at significantly higher rates than those in native trees (Meyer and Collopy 1990). Nests are made of small sticks and large amounts of moss and lichens and are located near the top of one of the tallest available trees. The typical clutch consists of 2 white eggs marked with dark reddish brown. Incubation lasts about 28 days, and the young fledge between 5 and 6 weeks of age.

Seasonal Occurrence. Most Swallow-tailed Kites arrive in Florida from late February to mid-March and lay eggs by mid-April. Birds gather at staging roosts in south Florida in late July and August before migrating south for winter.

Status. Swallow-tailed Kites may never have been numerous, but their historic North American breeding range probably included parts of 21 states. An abrupt decline early in this century reduced their range to several southeastern states. Distribution and numbers probably have changed little since the species reached its low point in the 1940s (Cely 1979; Robertson 1988). As in historic times, Florida harbors most of the North American population. The greatest numbers nest in the Big Cypress and Corkscrew Swamp regions of the southwest, the Fisheating Creek drainage, wetlands east and southwest of the central highlands, the St. Johns River drainage, the Green Swamp, and the Big Bend region (Meyer and Collopy 1990).

Breeding Swallow-tailed Kites are most conspicuous during the courtship and nest-building stages and while feeding young. Vocalizations, copulation, food deliveries, and birds carrying nest material provide the best clue to nest locations. Activity is very difficult to detect during the incubation and early nestling stages. The nest itself may be difficult to detect at even the most active sites. Large numbers of kites regularly gather in post-breeding communal roosts before migrating to South America. The largest of these, near Fisheating Creek in Glades County, contained 1,300 to 2,200 kites each year from 1987 to 1996, or up to 65% of the estimated U.S. population (Millsap 1987; Meyer 1993; K. Meyer, unpubl. data). Migration routes and wintering destinations were unknown until the fall of 1996, when 6 kites from Florida were tracked by satellite to a fairly small area in

southern Brazil (via Cuba, Mexico, and Central America) and 3 more with conventional radio transmitters were subsequently located nearby (K. Meyer, unpubl. data).

Kenneth D. Meyer

Sponsored by Dr. and Mrs. Clifford H. Cole

Aubry and June McCallum

Swallow-tailed Kite

