

## Cooler weather is on the way!

After a long, hot Florida summer, it's refreshing when the first cold fronts pass through. Along with these fronts comes a smattering of migrant warblers, shorebirds, waterfowl and hawks. Fall is also when butterflies, marine mammals and other animals are on the move.

In this edition, we focus on great places to find birds and butterflies during the fall. We also discuss the rare North Atlantic Right Whale and one of Florida's most unique birds, the Snail Kite. Lastly, we mention the importance of proper wildlife viewing ethics.

Have a fabulous fall and winter enjoying the outdoors!

-Great Florida Birding Trail and Wildlife Viewing staff

## Florida habitat is critical to North Atlantic Right Whales

With less than 400 individuals remaining, the North Atlantic Right Whale is one of the most endangered whale species on the planet. Found in the Atlantic Ocean primarily along the eastern coast of North America, it occurs from Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, south to Florida.

Each winter, a portion of the population, mainly pregnant females and juveniles, travels from their feeding grounds off New England and Canada to the coastal waters of the southeastern United States. Because these waters are the only known calving area for North Atlantic Right Whales, the National Marine Fisheries Service designated the region between the Altamaha River in Georgia and Sebastian Inlet in Florida as critical habitat.

North Atlantic Right Whales are baleen whales, which primarily eat zooplankton. They reach an average length of 50 feet and a weight up to 70 tons. After a yearlong gestation period, females give birth to a 14- to 16-foot-long calf that weighs approximately 3,000 pounds! To identify a North Atlantic Right Whale, look for a large-headed whale that is mostly black or dark gray. This whale has a flat back, with no dorsal fin; white bumps on its head, called callosities; broad, black, paddle-shaped flippers; and a V-shaped spout that may reach 15 feet in the air.

To protect this rare species, please use caution when boating. Right whales are slow swimmers and are often struck and killed by vessels. Wear polarized sunglasses, reduce your speed and keep a distance of 500 yards or more (U.S. laws prohibit boaters, kayakers and surfers from approaching closer without a scientific permit). Please immediately report sightings, preferably with GPS coordinates, to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) at 1-888-404-FWCC or the Marine Resources Council (MRC) at 1-888-97-WHALE. If you visit or live near the Atlantic Coast, you might be interested in joining the MRC volunteer sighting network ([www.mrcirl.org](http://www.mrcirl.org)). Visit FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute Web site ([research.MyFWC.com](http://research.MyFWC.com)) to find out more about this species.

## Feature Species: Snail Kite

By Selena Kiser

Clutching a large snail in his talon, the dark hawk flies over the marsh and lands in a short tree. There he devours his catch, using his sharp, curved beak to pull out the tasty escargot. Dropping the empty shell, he flies off in search of another snail.

You might be asking yourself, “There’s a hawk that eats snails?” Yes, the specialized Snail Kite is a medium-sized raptor that preys almost entirely on snails. And it doesn’t eat just any snail. It prefers apple snails, a group of mollusks comprising the largest freshwater snails on earth.

### Appearance

Male Snail Kites are sooty gray over most of their body. Females are dark brown with pale markings on the chest, belly and face. Both sexes have a distinguishing white area at the base of the tail. They have striking yellow, orange or red feet and ceres (skin at the base of the bill). Snail Kites have long claws to enable them to grasp and carry snails to a feeding perch, and a thin, black, sharply hooked bill to remove snails from their shells.

### Range

The Snail Kite is a tropical raptor found in Cuba, parts of southern Mexico and Central America, and much of South America east of the Andes. In the U.S., it is only found in Florida, where it lives in freshwater wetlands, from Kissimmee southward to the Everglades. (It was formerly called the Everglades Kite). This species’ range once stretched throughout much of the Florida peninsula, reaching as far west as Wakulla County in the Panhandle. Snail Kites don’t migrate and are considered permanent residents throughout their range. However, they live a somewhat nomadic life, following the supply of apple snails.

### Nesting

Snail Kites can nest nearly any time of year, although they usually lay their eggs between February and June. They build their nests in short trees, shrubs or herbaceous plants (e.g. cattails, reeds, etc.), 3 to 12 feet above water. Trees are preferred, as nests in sawgrass or cattails are more likely to fall apart. Females typically lay three eggs, which hatch after a month of incubation. The chicks fledge about four weeks later.

### Feeding

To understand Snail Kites is to understand their prey. Our only native apple snail is the Florida Apple Snail, the largest freshwater snail in the U.S. (up to 2.75 inches). Florida Apple Snails rely on shallow water levels in conjunction with emergent plants, such as sawgrass and pickerelweed, to survive. These plants provide a place for snails to lay their eggs above the waterline. Once the eggs hatch, the young snails fall into the water, where they develop into adults.

Snail Kites forage over shallow waters, in marshes and along edges of lakes, ponds and rivers. Kites rely on vision to find apple snails, so they hunt over open water, 5 to 30 feet above the surface. Wetlands with shallow water levels that don’t dry out completely for long periods are ideal. Temperatures must also be warm enough for the snails to be active. In times of drought or cold weather, kites will occasionally eat other items, such as crayfish or small turtles. However, many Snail Kites starve to death in times of prolonged drought; starvation is the main reason for adult kite mortality.

## Threats

The Snail Kite is a federally endangered species, listed since 1967. A large population decline began in the 1930s, coinciding with major wetland destruction and drainage. Numbers fell to fewer than 75 in the 1960s. After protection, numbers rebounded to nearly 3,500 kites by 1999. However, with persistent drought and further loss of wetlands in the last decade, the population has once again dwindled to approximately 1,000 individuals.

The major threat to Snail Kites is loss of wetlands with a suitable water level for Florida Apple Snails. Droughts are difficult for kites, but even worse are the permanent drainage of marshland and the drastic fluctuations of lake water levels. High water levels drown out plants in marshy edges, and low levels dry them out; neither is suitable for apple snails. Healthy marshes are the key to protecting the Snail Kite.

## What can you do?

Be attentive when boating in vegetated areas in the kite's preferred habitat, and keep back 150 yards from nests. Snail Kites build their nests low in vegetation and small trees, and fast-moving boats may accidentally destroy nests. Low water levels force kites to nest in areas that are more open and accessible to boats, increasing the likelihood of disturbance by humans. Too many disturbances and the parents may abandon their nest. If you see an FWC Snail Kite nesting sign, please back off from the area. Report improper boating activities near nests, or other forms of harassment, to the FWC at 1-888-404-FWCC.

## Where can I see Snail Kites?

Since Snail Kites are semi-nomadic, what may be a great location one year may not be so great the next. In the past, Lake Okeechobee was a regular home for Snail Kites. However, as water levels have not been ideal for Florida Apple Snails, many kites have moved further north. Lake Tohopekaliga, south of Kissimmee, has now become a stronghold. Kissimmee Lakefront Park and Makinson Island Conservation Area are currently good sites to find Snail Kites. Just south of Lake Toho, a few other locations to try are Lake Kissimmee State Park, Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area and Joe Overstreet Landing. South of Lake Okeechobee, the artificial wetland of Stormwater Treatment Area 5 is often productive. Further east, Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge is also a great place to look. The former stronghold of Snail Kites, Everglades National Park, is still well worth checking, even though numbers there have declined.

We wish you the best of luck on your quest to find these iconic Florida birds!

## More information on the Snail Kite and the Florida Apple Snail:

*MyFWC.com*

*[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/snail\\_kite/id](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/snail_kite/id)*

*[fl.biology.usgs.gov/sofla](http://fl.biology.usgs.gov/sofla)*

## Birding Trail Site Highlights: Fall birding and 'butterflying' hotspots

Florida autumns are amazing for finding a variety of both birds and butterflies. Although migrating warblers and other songbirds have mostly passed through by the end of October, multitudes of birds that overwinter in Florida are just settling in. Fall butterfly numbers are often staggering as the colorful insects follow the peak bloom of ironweed, gayfeather and other seasonal flowers. The following places are wonderful sites to visit, for beginners and experts alike, if you want to find both fall and winter birds and butterflies.

## **Panhandle (#66): Elinor Klapp-Phipps Park**

Partnering with the Northwest Florida Water Management District, this City of Tallahassee park encompasses 670 acres on the northern side of the capital city. There is a sports complex area on the east side, but the rest of the park is ideal for nature lovers, with a multitude of trails winding through forests and fields. Pick up a trail map from the various trailheads, or print one from the Web site. Fall brings interesting migrants, such as Kentucky Warbler and Blackburnian Warbler, as well as wintering Blue-headed Vireo and Hermit Thrush. This park is also a fantastic butterfly-watching destination, with more than 75 species of butterflies documented. Start your exploration along the Butterfly Trail on the north side of the park (near Gate A). As it fills with flowers, search the park for Barred Yellow, Zebra Heliconian (Florida's state butterfly) and many others.

*[www.talgov.com/parks/hipps.cfm](http://www.talgov.com/parks/hipps.cfm)*

Phone: 850-891-3975

Open: sunrise to sunset daily

Admission: free

## **West (#17): Morningside Nature Center**

In eastern Gainesville, this 278-acre nature park contains pine flatwoods, sandhills (predominantly longleaf pines) and small freshwater swamps known as cypress domes. Its pine habitats provide year-round homes for Brown-headed Nuthatch and Eastern Bluebird. However, if you check out the feeding station during the winter, you can get close-up looks at sparrows, American Goldfinch, House Wren and other seasonal visitors. Within the fire-dependent pine communities, fall wildflowers flourish and draw in many butterflies. Look for Pearl Crescent, Little Metalmark and various kinds of swallowtails. More than six miles of trails traverse the park, providing abundant places to look for winged beauties. Pick up a trail map and bird checklist at the nature center. The center also has plenty of activities for children and adults.

*[www.cityofgainesville.org/tabid/182/Default.aspx](http://www.cityofgainesville.org/tabid/182/Default.aspx)*

Phone: 352-334-2170

Open: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except holidays

Admission: free

## **East (#128): Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park**

This expansive state park of nearly 54,000 acres has vast areas of intermingled dry and wet prairie — perfect for fall birding and butterflying. There are more than 85 species of butterflies on the park checklist. On a typical fall day, you might find more than 100 White Peacock butterflies and a dozen different kinds of skippers. The park has butterfly and bird checklists you can download off its Web site or pick up at the visitor center. After enjoying the colorful butterflies, don't forget to look for resident Burrowing Owl, Crested Caracara and Florida Scrub-Jay. Northern Harrier and American Kestrel are abundant in winter, and this park is one of the best locations in Florida to find White-tailed Kite year-round. Henslow's Sparrow and other sparrow species winter here. The park is the most reliable place to find the Florida Grasshopper Sparrow; however, the best time of year to see this endangered subspecies is spring, when the males are singing.

*[www.floridastateparks.org/kissimmeeprairie](http://www.floridastateparks.org/kissimmeeprairie)*

Phone: 863-462-5360

Open: 8 a.m. to sunset daily

Admission: \$4 per vehicle

## **South (#102): Castellow Hammock Preserve and Nature Center**

Just southwest of Miami and the hubbub of a metropolitan area is a 112-acre oasis containing hardwood and pine forests. A half-mile nature trail takes you through a hardwood hammock, where you can find uncommon fall migrants, such as the Nashville Warbler. Some warbler species prefer to winter there, including Black-throated Blue Warbler and American Redstart. At the feeders near the nature center, you are likely to find winter delights, such as Indigo and Painted Buntings. The butterfly garden attracts wintering Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. You might get lucky and find a Black-chinned or Rufous Hummingbird, too. This preserve is also an excellent site for finding butterflies, particularly South Florida specialties, including Dina Yellow and Florida White. Other colorful, uncommon species you might encounter are the Atala, Florida Leafwing and Malachite.

*[www.miamidade.gov/Parks/Parks/castello\\_hammock.asp](http://www.miamidade.gov/Parks/Parks/castello_hammock.asp)*

Phone: 305-242-7688

Open: sunrise to sunset daily

Admission: free

## **Wildlife Viewing Ethics: Be a good guest**

Birders and wildlife viewers typically strive to be good stewards, however sometimes even they inadvertently cause harm to the very creatures they love. Some types of human activities can cause stress on wild animals, making it harder for them to nest, forage or migrate successfully. To be a good guest when outdoors, and to be courteous of other visitors, here are a few guidelines that lovers of wildlife should follow:

### **Stay on trails**

Did you know that a 20- to 100-yard area of disturbance may exist on each side of a hiking trail? Shy creatures are likely to be absent within this zone, but other more tolerant species, such as Eastern Gray Squirrels or Northern Cardinals, will remain. Multi-use trails, including equestrian and biking trails, have an even wider area of disturbance. Wild animals need areas where they can escape the presence of human activities. Keeping to the trails will provide them this much-needed respite.

### **No recordings, please**

Secretive birds often show themselves only if they hear another bird of the same species singing. Some birders use recordings of bird songs to entice these shy birds out of hiding. However, birds become stressed, believing that they have to fight off an invader in their territory. This makes them more susceptible to predation. They also expend energy that could be better spent foraging or finding nesting material. Using an owl call can have the same effect, as birds flock together thinking there is a nearby predator. Please reserve the use of recording outdoors (played quietly) only for verifying the identification of a bird's vocalizations.

### **Photograph with care**

Wildlife photography has mushroomed since digital cameras have become so widely available. However, shutterbugs should take care when photographing wild creatures to avoid disturbing them. Excessive flash photography, getting too close or having too many photographers surround an individual are some examples of disturbance. Keep flashes to a minimum, and use zoom lenses and teleconverters for close-up shots of your subject. Keep back far enough from the animal that you don't interfere with its normal behavior.

## Keep Fido at home

Dogs love a walk in the park. However, wildlife and pets typically do not mix! Most nature parks that allow dogs require them to be on a short leash, yet many owners let their dogs run free, not realizing the potential for negative impacts on wildlife and other visitors. Unrestrained pets on beaches can be especially problematic for many threatened bird species, as well as beach mice and sea turtles. Please refrain from letting your dog off its leash. If a site doesn't allow pets, keep them at home. The wildlife will thank you!

## Don't feed the wildlife

Although having bird feeders is a wonderful way to bring nature to your backyard, hand feeding is an altogether different story. Typically, birds that come to a feeder are still quite shy of people. Feeding birds or other wildlife by hand makes them associate humans with food. They start begging for food and no longer show natural restraint, putting them at risk. In some cases, this may even cause harm to humans or property. For example, illegally feeding Sandhill Cranes makes them accustomed to getting handouts from people, and they may become aggressive when they don't get fed. Some people even feed alligators, also illegal and very dangerous. Only feed wildlife on your property, using appropriate feeders that won't cause the animals to associate people with food.

## You're too close!

Watching wildlife up close can be a joyful experience. However, if your actions interfere with the behaviors of the wildlife you're observing, then you are too close (and/or too loud). When in a group, remind others to speak softly. If the animal you're watching stops what it is doing or starts to appear agitated, quietly back away. Nesting areas on beaches are particularly prone to disturbance. If parent birds are scared away from their nests, the eggs and young are exposed to predators and the hot sun. Keep your distance so that animals don't feel the need to flee. The best experiences are when wild creatures are not frightened by your presence. Remain quiet and still, and let them choose to come close on their terms.

In addition to being unethical, intentionally harassing or harming native wildlife is against Florida law (this is true for both you and your pet). When venturing outdoors, remember that you are guests in their home or territory. Be respectful of wildlife by giving animals the space they need.

## Wildlife viewing ethics links:

*[MyFWC.com/recreation/View\\_Info\\_ethics.htm](http://MyFWC.com/recreation/View_Info_ethics.htm)*

*[www.naturephotographers.net/ethics.html](http://www.naturephotographers.net/ethics.html)*

## Great Florida Birding Trail News and Notes

### Panhandle site improvements:

Thanks to a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Southern Company, seven GFBT locations in the western Panhandle benefitted from site improvements in 2009. Six locations received two-sided kiosks featuring the GFBT, local bird species and beginning birding tips. Sites and enhancements included:

- Bayou Marcus Wetlands, Pensacola: four shade stops, gravel path upgrade, interpretive signage, bird checklist and publication display racks. Escambia County also funded improvements to create a handicapped-accessible entrance.

- Blackwater Fisheries Center, Holt: kiosk (plus entrance station/kiosk funded by the FWC)
- Blackwater River State Park, Holt: kiosk and bird checklist
- Three Rivers State Park, Sneads: kiosk and bird checklist
- Falling Waters State Park, Chipley: kiosk and park benches
- Ponce de Leon Springs State Park, Ponce de Leon: kiosk and park benches
- St. Joseph Peninsula State Park, Port St. Joe: kiosk and park benches

The grant also funded 17 replacement GFBT road signs and two nature-based tourism workshops for 13 Panhandle counties. Stop by one of these GFBT sites this winter!

## Upcoming Wildlife Festivals

For more information, visit [floridabirdingtrail.com/events.asp](http://floridabirdingtrail.com/events.asp).

### Oct. 10

Chinsegut Reptile and Amphibian Festival, Brooksville  
Phone: 352-754-6722

### Oct. 17

Forgotten Coast Black Bear Festival, Carrabelle  
Phone: 850-697-2585

### Oct. 18-24

“Ding” Darling Days, Sanibel Island  
Phone: 239-472-1100

### Nov. 14

“Wings on the Wind” Bird Festival, Ponce Inlet  
Phone: 386-304-5545

### Dec. 5

Right Whale Festival, Jacksonville Beach  
Phone: 904-237-4220

### Jan. 13-18

Everglades Birding Festival, Hollywood  
Phone: 954-805-6810

### Jan. 27-Feb. 1

Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival, Titusville  
Phone: 321-268-5224

### Mar. 13

Pelican Island Wildlife Festival, Sebastian  
Phone: 772-562-3909

### Mar. 25-28

Big “O” Birding Festival, Clewiston  
Phone: 863-612-4783

## Thanks to *Kite Tales* Donors

Since we brought back the GFBT newsletter in January 2009, we have had some very generous donors. These donations help offset the cost of producing the newsletter. We thank the following who donated to *Kite Tales* this past year:

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## Help us keep *Kite Tales* aloft!

Please consider sending a tax-deductible donation to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida on behalf of the Great Florida Birding Trail.

Please make checks (in U.S. funds only) to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, with “GFBT/Kite Tales” written in the memo section of your check. Please send to:

**Wildlife Foundation of Florida**

**Attention: GFBT**

**P.O. Box 6181**

**Tallahassee, FL 32314-6181**