

Nesting and Roosting

Snail kites can nest year-round, but the peak season is from February through July. Males can often be seen bringing food or nesting material to females as part of mating behavior. They can also be seen flying a series of short dives and ascents near her. Males do most of the nest building, always choosing sites over water to reduce predator access. In the Everglades, kites tend to nest in short trees, while kites on lakes usually nest in non-woody plants like cattail and bulrush. These nests are more likely to collapse and are vulnerable to high winds, waves and even boat traffic.



Nesting snail kites

Legal Protection

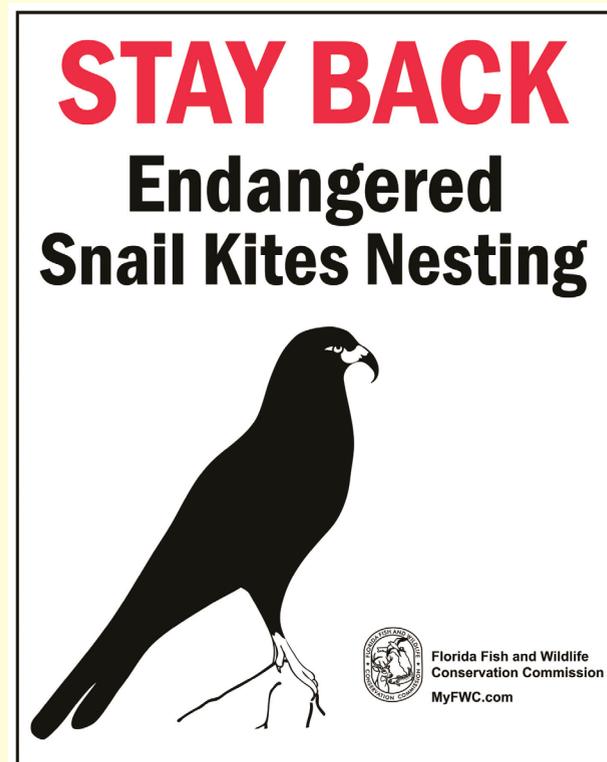
Snail kites have been protected by state and federal law under the Endangered Species Act since 1967, making it illegal to harass, kill, capture or collect them. This includes protection from activities that disrupt normal breeding, feeding or sheltering.



Leg bands on female snail kite

Research

Scientists have been monitoring snail kite nests and fitting kite chicks with leg bands since the mid 1990s. This allows researchers to make estimates of the number of snail kites in Florida, and to track movements and nesting locations. In 1999, scientists estimated that there were over 3,000 snail kites; this number dropped to less than 700 by 2009. At the current rate of decline, snail kites are predicted to be extinct within 30 years.



How you can help

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protect nest sites by posting signs around sensitive areas during the breeding season. Always avoid posted areas, particularly from February through August, and stay back at least 500 feet from warning signs.

Snail kites will leave their nest when bothered, but may not aggressively defend it from people or predators. They may fly away or just sit nearby until the intruder is gone. This behavior can lead people to think that their presence is not bothering the birds; however, any time a nest is untended the chicks or eggs are vulnerable to predators and harsh temperatures. The longer the nest is exposed, the greater the chance of failure. The best way you can help snail kites is to avoid posted nesting areas and to report any harassment or disturbance to FWC's Wildlife Alert Rewards Program at 888-404-FWCC (3922).



Male snail kite eating apple snail

Everglade Snail Kite



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The Snail Kite

The snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), a crow-sized hawk, is easily identified by the white patch at the base of its tail. It has a unique curved bill designed to quickly pluck snails from their shells. Adult males are slate-gray, while females are brown with varying amounts of white streaks on the face, chest and neck; both sexes have red eyes. Young birds, similar in appearance to females, are cinnamon colored with buff streaks.



Adult male snail kite

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Habitat

Snail kites can be found in Central and South America, but the Everglade snail kite (*R. s. plumbeus*) is the only subspecies found in the United States. Their entire U.S. range is restricted to South Florida, where they can be found in shallow freshwater marshes, like those of the Everglades, or along the shallow, grassy shorelines of lakes. Both habitats have a mixture of short plants and open water, making them great places for kites to see and catch apple snails as they climb to the surface to breathe. All of the habitats dry out periodically, causing snail kites to move around the state looking for good places to eat and breed.



Primary snail kite range in Florida

Feeding Habits

Snail kites only eat apple snails, which they hunt by flying low over the water while searching for their prey near the surface. Only snails that are breathing air, laying eggs or crawling in a few inches of water are vulnerable. After capturing a snail, the kite pries it open and, using its curved bill, cuts the snail from the shell. Sometimes this feat is performed while in flight.



Snail capture

© Mike Tracy

Exotic Snails

Large apple snails from South America have been spreading throughout Florida and are now common in many of our lakes and wetlands. These snails lay as many as 30 times more eggs, live twice as long, breed more times per year, and are two to three times the size of our native apple snails. Snail kites readily eat several species of apple snails, but young birds just learning to feed themselves may have a difficult time carrying and opening the larger exotics. However, much of the snail kite nesting in the state now appears to be dependent on exotic snail populations. See www.pompaceaproject.org to learn more about apple snails in Florida.



Non-native snail (left) vs. native snail (right)

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Adult female snail kite

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