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White-tailed Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

With its striking gray and white plumage accented by black "shoulders," an adult White-tailed Kite is quite distinctive. Juveniles are similar but have rusty streaking on the head, breast, and back. White-tailed Kites are breeding residents along the Pacific coast from southwest Washington south to Baja California, along the Gulf coast from Texas through Central America south to northern Argentina and Chile, and in southern Florida. Another population considered a separate species, the Black-shouldered Kite (*E. leucurus*), or a race of the White-tailed Kite occupies southwestern Europe, Africa, and southern Asia east to China and the Malay Peninsula (Dunk 1995).

White-tailed Kite populations were diminished severely by the early 20th century, and the species appeared on the brink of extinction. A rapid increase in range and numbers beginning in the early 1960s was attributed to an increase in suitable nesting and foraging habitats as forests were cleared by humans (Eisenmann 1971). However, many populations have declined during the 1980s and 1990s due apparently to loss of habitat, and possibly disturbance (Dunk 1995). Many populations experience fluctuations in size and range according to varying environmental conditions, including rainfall and prey abundance (Pruett-Jones et al. 1980). White-tailed Kites also exhibit nomadic behavior, appearing to colonize an area but abandoning it soon afterward.

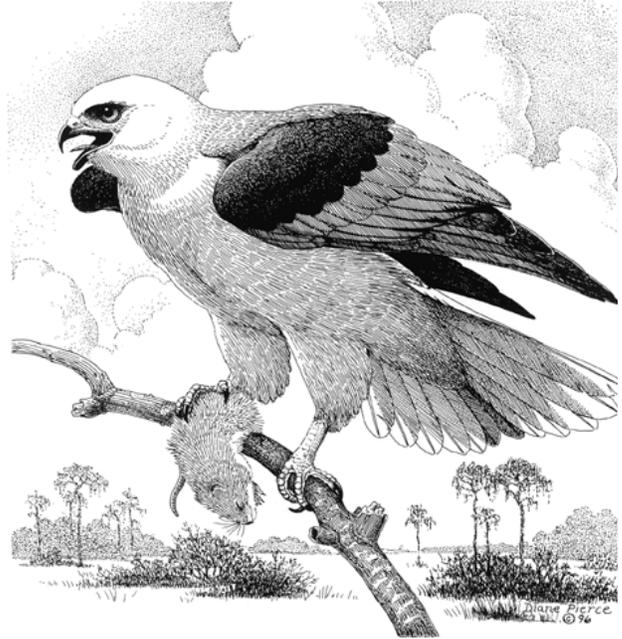


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As summarized by Kale (1974), sightings of White-tailed Kites in Florida averaged 0.26 reports per year from 1900 to 1950 but had increased to 0.91 reports per year from 1961 through 1973. Curnutt and Hoffman (1992) summarized sightings from 1973 through mid-1990 and the ratio had increased to 2.1 reports per year. McMillan and Pranty (1997) compiled 57 sightings in Florida from 1991 through 1996, a ratio of 9.5 reports per year. Interestingly, despite the great increase in sightings of White-tailed Kites in Florida since mid-1990, most of the recent nesting attempts in the state occurred prior to this period. Curnutt and Hoffman (1992) listed 13 nesting attempts, all in Broward and Dade counties, from 1986 through mid-1990. Since then, only 5 additional nest sightings have been published: 1 each in Broward and Dade counties in 1991 and again in 1993, and 1 in Highlands County in 1996. Of these 18 nesting attempts, 7 successfully fledged at least 1 nestling each, 7 failed to fledge any young, and the fate of 4 nests was not indicated.

In Florida, the 4 original nesting attempts (1872-1930) were in native prairie habitats in central Florida, but all nesting attempts from 1986 to 1993 were in the eastern Everglades, where hydrology and fire frequency have been altered significantly by humans. In 1996, a pair of White-tailed Kites nested in a Highlands County cattle pasture that formerly was native bayhead and prairie (McMillan and Pranty 1997).

Habitat. White-tailed Kites prefer short-grass prairies with scattered trees and shrubs for nesting, but they forage primarily over fields, pastures, and marshes. Although some sources (e.g., Ehrlich et al. 1988) state the White-tailed Kites feed on a variety of prey, Dunk (1995: 4-5) calls the species "a small mammal specialist," citing evidence that greater than 95% of more than 12,500 prey items taken were small mammals. He further states that prey other than small mammals is taken "only incidentally and probably should not be considered "normal prey." King (1987), Curnutt (1989), and McMillan and Pranty (unpubl.) all identified hispid cotton rats

(*Sigmodon hispidus*) as a primary prey item taken in Florida.

White-tailed Kite nests are built by both sexes and are composed of twigs and sticks with an inner layer of grass or leaves. Nests are built in the upper third of nest trees and are usually located on habitat edges. The eggs are whitish and marked with varying shades of brown. Most clutches number 4 eggs, with a range of 3 to 6 (Dixon al. 1957). Incubation lasts 30 to 32 days and is performed solely by the female. Nestlings are capable of flight 35 days of age (Stendell 1972). White-tailed Kites usually are single-brooded, but second broods are known (Dunk 1995).

Seasonal Occurrence. A permanent resident in Florida, with apparently some movement in fall of birds that breed in Texas or Mexico and move east to winter in the Florida peninsula (Curnutt and Hoffman 1992; Pranty and McMillian 1997). Egg dates of Florida nests range from 2 April to 28 May. A nest found by King (1987) contained 3 nestlings and 1 egg on 2 April 1986; therefore, egg-laying must have occurred in late February or the first of March. Young have been observed in Florida nests through 10 June (King 1987).

Status. This attractive raptor was a rarity in Florida even in the late nineteenth century. Howell (1932) listed 3 breeding records: April 1872 near Sarasota, 28 May 1887 "on the Kissimmee River," and 4 February 1910 somewhere on the Kissimmee Prairie. The latter record has recently been questioned (Stevenson and Anderson 1994; Curnutt and Hoffman 1992), due to the lack of details. A fourth breeding record prior to the Atlas occurred in Osceola County, when Wray Nicholson collected 4 eggs from a nest 19 km (12 mi) southwest of Kenansville 16 April 1930 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

In September and October 1984, at least 1 adult White-tailed Kite was observed repeatedly in eastern Broward County (Atherton and Atherton 1985). On 30 September 1984, a juvenile was seen in the same area (Dave Goodwin, Lee Snyder, and Bill Pranty *in* Powell 1986) so local breeding seems likely.

In 1986, the first year of the Atlas project, three White-tailed Kite nests were found in western Broward County. Seven young fledged from 2 nests, but the third nest failed (King 1987). No nests were found the following year but in 1988 a nest was found in Everglades National Park in Dade County (Curnutt 1989). This nest fledged 3 young, but 1 soon disappeared. Four pairs of kites built nests in Broward County in 1989. Three of these nests failed, but 1 produced 3 young (Curnutt and Hoffman 1992). In 1990, 5 White-tailed Kite nests were discovered: 3 in Broward County and 2 in Dade County (Langridge 1990b). One of the Broward nests failed, but the other 2 each produced 4 fledglings (Curnutt and Hoffman 1992). Of the 2 Dade County nests, 1 failed, but the other produced 3 fledglings (Curnutt and Hoffman 1992). In 1991, 2 nests were found: 1 in Broward County, and 1 with 3 young in Dade County (Langridge 1991).

Five additional nesting attempts have been made by White-tailed Kites in Florida since the end of Atlas fieldwork. No nesting was reported in 1992, but 2 nests were located in 1993. One pair observed courting in Davie (Broward County) on 29 January was found nesting in a citrus tree on 28 February (J. Baker *in* Pranty 1993a). This pair was last seen 2 May 1993, but it is uncertain whether any young fledged (J. Baker *in* Pranty 1993b). The second nesting attempt in 1993 involved a pair building a nest northwest of Homestead (Dade County) on March (P. William and Susan Smith *in* Pranty 1993b). Further information regarding this nest was not published. No conclusive evidence of nests was published in 1994 or 1995, but a nest was found at Buck Island Ranch (Highlands County) on 21 March 1996 (McMillian and Pranty 1997). This nest contained 4 eggs from 13 April to 11 May. On 11 May, the nest contained 2 nestlings and 1 egg; a third nestling was found dead under the nest. On 19 May, the nest contained 3 nestlings, but the nest was empty on 26 May. This was the first nesting attempt in the prairie region of Florida since 1930 (McMillian and Pranty 1997).

Bill Pranty

White-tailed Kite

