

AGONISTIC BEHAVIOR IN THE SWALLOW-TAILED KITE

W. BOYD BLIHOVDE

Wekiwa Springs State Park, 1800 Wekiwa Circle, Apopka, FL 32712

The Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) is an uncommon to fairly common visitor to wetland habitat of central Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). This species is easily recognized by its deeply forked tail and habit of soaring above the treetops (Kale et al. 1990). Nests are often constructed in the tops of tall pines (Meyer 1995) making them fairly difficult to find (pers. obs.). Swallow-tailed Kites often make agonistic threats toward other predatory birds, but this behavior rarely results in contact (Meyer 1995). The following agonistic behavioral observations were made within Wekiwa Springs State Park, Orange County, Florida.

On 8 May 2001, while Alexis Suazo and I surveyed an area infested with southern pine beetles (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) that was going to be cut, we saw a Swallow-tailed Kite landing in a nest (nest one) atop a tall loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*). The kites' nest location was determined with a Global Positioning System (GPS) unit and the tree was marked. On 10 May 2001 we made another trip to the site to begin cutting trees infested with southern pine beetles. On that trip park ranger Joe Sutter observed a kite fly to a different nest (nest two) 111 m north of nest one. At 07:30 on 24 May 2001 I made a final trip to the nests before a timber crew was to begin work in the area. While standing under the kites' nest tree, I heard a loud swooshing sound from directly over-head. Looking up I noticed a kite diving through the pine canopy. I thought the kite was attempting to scare me away; however, after a few seconds I saw a Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) leave the pine and fly to another loblolly approximately 20 m away. During the hawk's flight from the first perch to the second, the kite dove and hit the hawk in the back, grazing the left side of its body. The hawk landed while the kite continued circling it. After only a few seconds the hawk flew to a tree approximately 50 m. away. During that flight the kite attempted to strike the hawk again, however it appeared to miss. The hawk landed in a large pond pine (*Pinus serotina*) and the kite circled it and then started vocalizing loudly. This vocalization can be described as a *kleee kleee kleee* call (as described by Meyer 1995). After one or two minutes of circling and vocalizing, seven other kites came from all directions and circled with the original bird. They all circled and called for nearly 20 minutes and then gradually dispersed.

On 24 May 2001 a timber contractor began removing trees infested with southern pine beetles from the area where the kite nests were found. The kites' nest trees and a dozen surrounding trees (approximately 20 m in radius for each nest) were saved and the kites did not abandon the nests. However, by approximately 10 June both nests appeared abandoned. Since no intensive surveys were done solely for Swallow-tailed Kites after 24 May, suggesting an outcome for the nesting pair or fledglings would be speculative.

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