

NOTES ON *HELICOLESTES HAMATUS* IN SURINAM

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The Slender-billed Kite (*Helicolestes hamatus*) is a reputedly rare South American hawk about whose behavior little has been published. In general slaty color it resembles the Everglade Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), with which it was long confused, and from which it differs, among other respects, in being a plumper, heavier bird, with rather short broad wings and a short tail.

## DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERS

In view of the confusion between these two species, found even in the "Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum" (Sharpe, 1874: 327-329), it is desirable to call attention to some of the salient differences.

When seen in life, *Helicolestes* shows no similarity to *Rostrhamus*, for its short tail and broad wings make it look like a buzzard (*Buteo*), while the long tail and wings of *Rostrhamus* suggest a harrier (*Circus*). In all plumages *Helicolestes* differs from *Rostrhamus* in lacking white upper and under tail coverts.

The weight of specimens collected by me in Surinam show that *Helicolestes* is a considerably heavier bird than *Rostrhamus*. *Helicolestes hamatus*: 5 ♂♂ 377-448 (423) gms., 7 ♀♀ 367-485 (426) gms. *Rostrhamus sociabilis*: 3 ♂♂ 304-374 (347) gms., 1 ♀ 385 gms.

Sharpe (1874) mistakenly applied to the adult plumage of the Slender-billed Kite, the name *Rostrhamus* [sic] *sociabilis* (Vieillot), which belongs to the Everglade Kite; the immature plumage he called a different species, *Rostrhamus taeniurus*, while the Everglade Kite he designated *Rostrhamus leucopygus*. In this treatment Sharpe relied mainly on Schlegel (1862). Bangs and Penard (1918) put an end to the confusion by giving descriptions (based on seven Surinam skins) of adult and immature plumages and by erecting for *hamatus* a new genus, *Helicolestes*. My twelve specimens show the following characters:

*Adults*: Both sexes alike, wholly slate gray with black tips to the primaries and tail. Soft parts—iris yellow (not red, as described by Schlegel and Sharpe); bill black; cere and lores scarlet orange; feet scarlet orange; claws, black.

*Immatures*: Unlike *Rostrhamus*, similar to adults in color, but 2 to 4 white bands on the tail and some rusty edgings on wings and scapulars (Plate 1).

## RANGE

So far as known, *Helicolestes* has a very patchy distribution in northern South America. It is recorded from eastern Peru, from a few rather scattered Brazilian localities in lower Amazonia, from Surinam, and from a few places in Colombia (Hellmayr and Conover, 1949). It was recorded from Venezuela for the first time as



*Helicolestes hamatus* in Surinam. (*Above*) Immature at edge of pool, Nickerie, Oct. 1957. (Photo by D. C. Geyskes.) (*Below*) Undamaged shells of *Pomacea dolioides* under resting place of *Helicolestes hamatus*, Paramaribo, Jan. 17, 1951 (Photo by F. Haverschmidt.)



*Helicolestes hamatus* in Surinam. (Above) Tree with nest, Paramaribo, July 20, 1958. Nest is on main branch extending diagonally to left where it divides into smaller branches (see arrows). (Below) Downy nestling, Paramaribo, July 21, 1958. (Photos by F. Haverschmidt.)

recently as 1946, on the Colombian frontier in Apure (Phelps and Phelps, 1957). It is not recorded by Chubb (1916) from British Guiana.

#### DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT IN SURINAM

Strangely enough, this species is not mentioned at all by the Penard brothers (1908) from the Guianas. However, *Helicolestes* is not at all rare in Surinam. I have many records from widely scattered localities in the western half of the country. I have collected it on both sides of the Surinam River and observed it along the Saramacca and Coppename rivers, along the road leading westwards from the Coppename River to Coronie and along the Nickerie River in the most western part of the country.

It is confined to the coastal plain, a broad belt of low swampy country, which is about 40 kilometers deep near Paramaribo, becomes narrower near the Marowijne in the east, and much wider towards the Corantijn River in the west. This swampy belt is interspersed with numerous sand and shell ridges covered with high and dense woodland, running more or less parallel to the coastline. Extensive clay swamps and marshes, mostly covered by grasses, are found between the ridges.

In contrast with *Rostrhamus*, which favors open fresh water, marshes and flooded rice fields, *Helicolestes* is not a bird of open country. It frequents the wooded ridges just mentioned, where it sits on a lookout at the edge of some overgrown pool or small swamp. It has adapted itself to cultivation, as it is of regular and quite frequent occurrence along the trenches in coffee plantations, which, owing to the coffee trees and their taller shade trees, form a somewhat forest-like habitat.

#### FEEDING HABITS

*Helicolestes*, like *Rostrhamus*, apparently feeds exclusively on large snails of the genus *Pomacea*. Its hunting method is different. *Rostrhamus* quarters like a harrier, flying back and forth over open water, catching snails with its talons and then going to a stump or fence to extract the snail from its shell in a way described by Murphy (1955). I have never seen *Helicolestes* quarter over water. Usually it has been sitting motionless on a low branch of a coffee tree overhanging water or among thick shrubbery at the edge of a small pool, waiting to pounce downward and to catch its prey. I have not been able to determine whether the snail is taken with the talons or the bill, or to see how the snail is loosened from the shell. As the bill of *Helicolestes* is slender and deeply hooked like that of *Rostrhamus*, the

extraction is probably effected the same way in both species. Several times I have found a pile of empty and undamaged snail shells assembled under a perch of *Helicolestes* (Plate 1). Dr. D. C. Geyskes of Paramaribo identified these shells as *Pomacea dolioides* (Reeve). When doing archeological work on one of the sand ridges in the Nickerie District in October, 1957, Dr. Geyskes was lucky enough to observe an extremely tame individual, which returned daily to a small pool where it sat on a low stump looking for snails, and which at last became so confiding that it could be approached and photographed (Plate 1). It was a bird in immature plumage, as shown by the rusty edgings on the wings and the white tail band.

#### OTHER BEHAVIOR

*Rostrhamus* is a social bird living and nesting in groups. It roosts socially in great numbers as I have described elsewhere (Haverschmidt, 1954). *Helicolestes*, on the other hand, is a relatively solitary bird, which I have seen circling in the air usually in pairs or small groups.

*Helicolestes* is rather noisy. The call note I have heard is a long-drawn mewling "Weéeeuuuu." This was uttered in alarm, when I suddenly surprised a bird sitting on an overhanging branch near the water, but also when it circled in pairs high in the air, resembling with its broad rounded wings and its short tail a buzzard (*Buteo*). I have watched it countless times circling over my garden at the edge of the plantation "Ma Retraite" near Paramaribo, usually in pairs, sometimes three or four birds, and on October 8, 1953 six, and on October 30, 1956 as many as eight, one of them being an immature.

Sometimes a peculiar flight was observed under these circumstances. They would suddenly stop circling, fly in a straight direction with rapid wing beats, the tips of the wings curled upwards a little, and then stop abruptly and shoot upwards. At the end of the upward stoop they resumed flying with accelerated wing beats. Once I saw one of a circling pair suddenly stop and make a downwards dive with half closed wings. During their circling the mewling cry is constantly uttered; in fact it is their cry that generally draws my attention to the circling birds.

#### NESTING

As nothing is known about its nesting, I always had hoped to find a breeding pair. A female collected on June 22 had an enlarged ovary, so its breeding period could be expected in the long rainy season.

In the plantation "Ma Retraite" behind my garden there are some

swampy places in which many trees of different size grow with an almost unpenetrable undergrowth. At the edge of these places I had seen *Helicolestes* many times so I suspected them of breeding in that habitat. Here and there in the coffee plantation are a few colossal cotton-trees (*Ceiba pentandra*), their huge main trunks and crowns towering over the coffee trees and their shade trees, but I had never seen the birds about the cotton-trees.

On July 20, 1958, while I was passing one of these cotton-trees, a *Helicolestes* rose from its crown and started circling just above it, all the time uttering its mewing cry. As I watched through my binoculars, it repeatedly alighted on different branches to rise again and circle around the tree. Then I lost sight of it for a moment. Suddenly I noticed the bird (or perhaps its mate) alighting silently on one of the big side branches, and then I saw that it stood on the rim of a nest. After a while it settled down on the nest and remained there. When I returned a short time later, the bird was still sitting in its nest.

The nest was placed on a strong lateral main branch on a spot where the first slender side branches protruded in every direction (Plate 2). The nest, about 20 meters above the ground and not very large, was of the usual hawk type, made of dead sticks.

I took immediate steps to investigate the nest's contents, but cotton-trees are difficult to tackle because of the huge dimensions of the trunk. However, on July 21, two expert Javanese climbers of the plantation managed to reach the nest, after two hours of hard work and with the help of ropes. The nest proved to contain a single downy nestling, which was brought to me (Plate 2).

*The nestling.* Its general color was mouse brown, with a dirty white stripe over the back; its head was dirty white with a mouse brown triangle on the top. Soft parts were as follow: iris black; bill glossy black, with the white egg tooth still on the upper mandible, cere and sides of bill orange yellow; inside of the mouth reddish pink; feet orange yellow with claws glossy black. The head markings of the nestling were extremely similar to those of the nestlings of *Rostrhamus sociabilis* on the photograph in Bent (1937).

The nestling uttered a loud "hee." I tried to keep the young bird alive by feeding it on small snails, but it died after three days. Its skin (my field number 3435) is in the Leiden Museum.

I wish to thank Mr. W. B. Leeuwenburgh, manager of the plantation "Ma Retraite," without whose generous help the nest never could have been reached.

## SUMMARY

*Helicolestes hamatus* is a medium-sized South American hawk somewhat resembling the Everglade Kite, *Rostrhamus sociabilis*, but lacking the white upper and under tail coverts, and having broad, rather short, wings and a short tail, so that in shape it is more like a *Buteo*. Weights of 12 specimens are given, and compared with weights of *Rostrhamus*.

*Helicolestes*, though generally regarded as a rare bird, is not rare in Surinam. It frequents overgrown places near water on the coastal plain and is of regular occurrence in shade trees along the trenches in coffee plantations.

It feeds on large snails, *Pomacea dolioides*, which it captures by pouncing down from a lookout above water. Accumulations of undamaged snail shells can be found under its favorite perches.

On July 20, 1958, a nest (hitherto unrecorded) was found at about 20 meters above the ground in a huge cotton-tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) in a coffee plantation near Paramaribo. It contained a single downy nestling. The nestling is described and pictured.

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