

The Black Hawk (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) in South Florida

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Since August 12, 1972 there have been numerous observations of black hawks in the Miami area. Recent photographs were examined by Dean Amadon, who confirmed that they depict immature Common Black Hawks, *Buteogallus anthracinus*. The origin and current status of these birds is unclear; therefore, a summary of available information is of interest.

The first reported observation of the bird was August 12, 1972 at Virginia Key by Wally George, who is an experienced and competent local observer. The bird when first seen was soaring overhead, gradually gained altitude and soared westward out of sight. Numerous birders visited the area after the initial sighting and the bird was seen on an average of once or twice per week for several weeks. In addition to soaring, it was seen perched several times, usually near mangroves, on the north side of Virginia Key. More than 50 observers have seen this bird; once at close range by about 40 birders on a Tropical Audubon Society field trip.

There was substantial agreement that the bird was uniformly dull black with a single broad white medial tail band, visible from both above and below. The underwing appeared uniformly black. The base of the primary was without conspicuous pale shading. This is characteristic of adult birds of most populations of the species. The overall shape, broad wings and relatively short tail were typical.

Wally George contacted local zoos, bird farms and bird importers and was informed that none of them had ever kept any black hawks.

Five months after the first sighting, an adult bird was seen in company of an immature of what appeared to be also a Common Black Hawk. This was at Interama, about 11 miles from Virginia Key, where the first birds were seen. It was initially presumed that the Virginia Key bird had moved to a new location. Subsequent reports from both areas during the same period of time suggested, however, that there was more than one adult bird, and on March 22, 1973 and later, two adult birds were reported by another experienced observer, Mark Trafton, who had lived in Honduras for several years and was familiar with the species.

From November 13 to 20, 1973 a black hawk was seen at yet another area, namely, along the Dania cut-off canal in Fort Lauderdale, approximately 25 miles from the site of the initial sighting. This bird was quite tame and perched on telephone poles until closely approached before flying to a wooded area along the canal.

Yet another was seen on March 26, 1975 near Krome Avenue and the Tamiami Trail, about 200 miles from Virginia Key. This area is at the eastern edge of the Everglades and consists of fresh water marsh with clusters of low trees and bushes. This is the only record away from coastal mangroves.

On May 3, 1975, an immature bird was photographed by Trafton at Greynolds Park, which is immediately adjacent to the Interama Tract. The same bird was photographed in November by Nick Speizio. Slides were forwarded to Ben King and to Dean Amadon for confirmation of the identification. The latter commented, "The photos do appear to be of a young *Buteogallus anthracinus*. The markings of the immature of this species vary considerably and we do not seem to have a specimen with such a distinct superciliary (at least anterior to the eye). However, in view of the variation in head markings, I do not doubt that such exist. Friedmann's description (in Ridgway) of the immature of *B.a. gundlachu* of Cuba suggests that it has a complete superciliary, but our one immature of *gundlachii* does not

"The immature of *B. u. urubitinga*, the Great Black Hawk, is similar to that of the Common Black Hawk, but does in general have a much more distinct white superciliary. On the other hand, the bird in the photo does not seem to have such extremely long, coarse tarsi as *urubitinga*. Also, the tail barring, to the extent visible, seems to agree better with *anthracinus*."

DISCUSSION

The reported observations had spanned a period of at least three and a half years to January 29, 1976 at the time of this writing. Birds have been seen in

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Black Hawk in South Florida: Photo|Mark Trafton

immature, and adult plumages. On several occasions, either two adults, or an immature and an adult have been seen at the same time. Because of the sequence of sightings, it appears that there is an absolute minimum of four individuals. It is possible that some of the sightings away from the two primary areas represent different birds and that some sightings in the primary areas represent more than one individual, so that more individuals could be present.

The two areas from which most of the observations have come are Virginia Key and the Interama-Greynolds Park area. Extensive mangroves are present in both areas and in the former particularly, the mangroves are adjacent to extensive tidal flats. Crabs of several species abound, both on the mudflats and on dry land adjacent to them. Observers have noted the Florida birds eating landcrabs, the favorite food of the Black Hawk elsewhere in its range. The immature bird in Greynolds Park was also observed feeding at the carcass of a domestic muscovy duck. (The muscovy had not been killed by the hawk.)

Most of the black hawks were soaring when first noted. Occasionally they have been at relatively low altitude, perhaps 50 feet above the ground, and when followed, soared higher in ever-widening circles until nearly out of sight. They have often been seen soaring in flocks of Turkey Vultures. Several observations have been made while the birds perched, usually 15-30 feet above the ground. When approached, they usually flew a short distance into wooded areas or mangroves.

The origin of these black hawks is mysterious. They do not appear to be escapees and there is no information to suggest that any have been imported, despite thriving wild animal importation in the Miami area. *B. a. gundlachii*, the race inhabiting Cuba and the Isle of Pines is presumably

diminishing in numbers owing to destruction of habitat. It is conceivable that birds of this race, wandering in search of suitable habitat, could have strayed to Florida. Several other West Indian species have strayed to southern Florida in recent years including the White-cheeked Pintail, Antillean Palm Swift, Loggerhead Kingbird, Bahama Swallow and Stripe-headed Tanager. One species, the Caribbean Coot, appears to have established itself as a breeding bird and is present in increasing numbers. While human agency may be responsible for the presence of the black hawk, there is thus far no evidence. The only U.S. race of the species, *B. a. anthracinus*, is found in coastal lowlands, wooded streams and even hilly deserts from southwestern United States, south through Mexico and Central America, to northern South America. If natural agency is responsible for the presence of the Florida birds, it would seem likely that they represent *B. a. gundlachii*, a race inhabiting the mangrove zone of Cuba and the Isle of Pines. It is a rather distinct form, long called a species, but cannot be identified from the photographs and information at hand.

Though at least one immature bird has been observed, there has been no observation of nesting, and at this time, breeding status in Florida is unknown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to Wally George for providing me with his records, to Mark Trafton, who offered his records and photographs, to Nick Speizio for his photographs, and to Dean Amadon for examining the photographs, confirming the identification, and commenting on the manuscript.