

Black-shouldered Kite: range expansion into Mississippi

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DURING THE LATTER ONE-HALF OF the nineteenth century the Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*), was known from the southern Great Plains of the United States. But then it disappeared (Johnsgard 1979), only to reappear in recent years. It is a species with numerous extralimital records in the eastern United States (e.g., American Ornithologists' Union 1983, Knox 1947, Easterla 1976, Cholinski and Threlkeld 1984, Kennington 1984) including an isolated resident population in south-central Florida (Stevenson 1976). It has been considered a casual fall visitor in Alabama (Imhof 1976) and has also been seen in April in northwestern Florida (Weston 1965). Until recently, Black-shouldered Kites had been confirmed only once in Louisiana (Lowery 1974) and were not known from Mississippi. Since 1960, the species rapidly expanded its range in Central America, and in the past few years has reoccupied much of its former Great Plains range and expanded farther eastward. In this paper we document the first appearance of the Black-shouldered Kite in Mississippi and the establishment of a breeding population there.



Photo/B. Miller/VIREO

On October 27, 1982, Johnson and Toups photographed two Black-shouldered Kites near Pearlinton, in western Hancock County, Mississippi, establishing the first Mississippi record for the species. The birds were in an old field area covering approximately 1000 acres (400 hectares) and dominated by broomsedge (*Andropogon* sp.), and other grasses with scattered bushes and a very few Slash Pines (*Pinus elliotii*), and Live Oaks (*Quercus virginianus*).

A possible third kite was seen about 1.6 kilometers west of the original location on November 9 in an approximately 150-acre (60 hectares) clearcut that had been planted to Slash Pine and was grown

found it completed, but empty. On April 17, Jackson observed the pair copulating on a horizontal limb of a dead tree. He again climbed to the nest, which then contained two eggs. The completed nest was a sturdy structure of sticks lined with broomsedge. Both adults were seen in the area and one bird was consistently seen on the nest through April 23. On May 5, however, no kites were seen. Jackson climbed to the nest June 12, and found the nest intact but empty. There was no sign that the eggs had hatched.

On August 11, 1983, two juvenile Black-shouldered Kites, but no adults, were found at the original site, confirming successful nesting in the area.

In the past thirty-five years, this species has reclaimed much of its former habitat in the Great Plains and is now moving beyond it

up in broomsedge and blackberries (*Rubus* sp.). On January 6, 1983, two more kites were found by Toups and Gerry Morgan about 6.4 kilometers north of the original site. The habitat was again an approximately 150-acre (60 hectares) clearcut dominated by broomsedge, with a scattering of young Live Oaks and dead snags, which were used as perches by the kites.

Within a few minutes repeated observations of both "pairs" confirmed that there were at least four birds. A kite was never observed again at the site of the single bird, and the first two birds were seen regularly only through mid-February, 1983. The second pair remained faithful to their area and, on February 26, Toups found a nest 5 meters up in an 8 meter Live Oak.

One bird was on the nest on February 26 and the second was perched in a dead tree nearby. Subsequent observations through March 18 always revealed one bird on the nest. On March 21, one kite was seen perched near the nest tree, but no bird could be seen on the nest. On March 25, a kite was again seen at the nest, this time pulling or maneuvering something in the bottom. On March 31, both adults were briefly seen at the nest, then one remained perched on the edge of the nest. Both birds were later seen perched away from the nest tree. On April 4 and 5, a kite was observed pulling leaves and twigs from near the nest and incorporating them into the nest rim. On April 10, Jackson climbed to the nest and

Through the fall of 1983, Black-shouldered Kites were seen regularly in clearcuts and grassy fields in the area. On December 19, 1983, seven Black-shouldered Kites were seen distributed among three localities in Hancock County.

By March 1984, only a single pair of Black-shouldered Kites could be located in Hancock County. That pair built a nest 7 meters up in an 8 meter Live Oak, 100 meters from the edge of a 200-acre (80 hectares), three-year-old Slash Pine plantation. On May 27, two adults with two recently fledged young were found. The young birds remained perched on dead trees near the nest and, during a 3-hour visit, flew only short distances. They were never approached by the adults. On June 7, Toups found three fledged young and two adults at the same location. The last date that the birds were seen at that location was June 13. On several dates from mid-November through December 1984, up to three kites were seen at the site of the original observations and a single bird was seen about two kilometers to the southeast.

COINCIDENT WITH OUR RECORDS OF Black-shouldered Kites in Mississippi, the species was also observed in Point Coupee, Calcasieu, Vermilion, and Allen parishes, Louisiana (Purrington 1983, Ortego 1983), and found nesting in St. Tammany Parish (Jackson 1983, Purrington 1984), adjacent to Hancock County, Mississippi. A lone kite was also seen at Ft. Morgan, Alabama, November

20, 1982 (Purrington 1983).

In Mississippi we only saw the species in fields of 150 acres (60 hectares) or more that were dominated by broomsedge. Although the various sites have been surrounded by mature Slash Pine forest or coastal marshes, the kites have not been observed perched or foraging in those habitats. Since their appearance in 1982, Black-shouldered Kites have been found in the area in every month except July. Hancock County is the least populated of Mississippi's coastal counties and most of the area where kites have been observed is forest industry land planted in Slash Pines and managed for pulp and wood. Large clearcuts are characteristic of the area and have apparently provided the habitat that has allowed Black-shouldered Kites to colonize coastal Mississippi. Based on the characteristics of the habitats in which kites have been seen in Mississippi, it seems that clearcuts with scattered snags and small trees and replanted to pines can remain suitable habitat for only 2-3 years before ground cover becomes too dense and high. The continued existence of the Black-shouldered Kite in Mississippi appears to be dependent on the present uses and management of the area. Clearing of the land for other uses or intensive site preparation that involves removal of all snags and trees before planting would likely make the habitat unsuitable for the kites.

Habitat, behavior, and nesting phenology of the Black-shouldered Kite in Mississippi seem similar to those reported elsewhere. For example, 60 of 120 egg dates reported in Bent (1937) were between April 2 and 29. Bent also reports Live Oaks as frequent Black-shouldered Kite nest trees. He describes one nest site as "a low flat island a mile or more square, mostly covered with long, thick grass, quite marshy in places, but largely dry"—a description which perfectly fits the habitat of the species in Mississippi. Mississippi is apparently unique in having three kite species: Black-shouldered, Mississippi (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), and American Swallow-tailed (*Elanoides forficatus*) breeding in the same county. Some have had all three species in view simultaneously, although no interactions among the species have been noted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jackson's work on the Mississippi coast was supported in part by a grant from the Mississippi Bureau of Marine

Resources. Jan Dubuisson, Gerry Morgan, David Ruple, Mickey Baker, Dalton King, Terrie and Larry Gates, and Bette Jackson assisted with observations.

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California Quail (*Callipepla californica*). Illustration/Hillary Hulen