

First nesting of dark-morph Hook-billed Kite in the United States



This dark-morph Hook-billed Kite was the first ever recorded in Texas when it was discovered and photographed in Bentsen—Rio Grande Valley State Park 10 December 1998. It was apparently a male. *Photograph by J. E. Culbertson.*

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Hook-billed Kite (*Chondrohierax uncinatus*) is a rare and little-known breeding bird in the United States, occurring only in extreme southern Texas in riparian habitats along the lower Rio Grande River between Falcon Dam and Santa Ana N.W.R. (A.O.U. 1998, Palmer 1988), and perhaps farther eastward (Lower Rio Grande N.W.R. files; D. Blankenship, pers. comm.). All of the adults reported from nests observed along the Rio Grande River have been light morphs (Delnicki 1978, Clark and Wheeler 2001), as shown in Fleetwood and Hamilton (1967) and Hiller (1976).

Observers in 1998 saw, for the first time in Texas, a dark-morph adult Hook-billed Kite in Bentsen—Rio Grande Valley State Park, and it was photographed by Jim Culbertson (Frontispiece; cf. <http://www.greglasley.net/hbkite.html>). I judge this bird to be an adult male by plumage. A dark-morph adult, presumably this individual, has been seen sporadically since that time in the park.

On 20 June 2002, I found the nest of a Hook-billed Kite in which the female of the pair was a dark morph (Figs. 1-4); the male was a typical light morph (Fig. 5). The female differed in plumage from the presumed male in Culbertson's photograph by being a more sooty gray overall, having a noticeably darker cap, and having more grayish marbling in the white band on the uppertail (see Clark and Wheeler 2001). It was also sexed by its pairing with an adult male and its behavior of remaining close to the nest. Clark and Wheeler (2001) discuss sexual

differences in plumages of adult Hook-billed Kites; typical male and female light-morph adults are presented here (Figs. 5, 6), whereas Figure 7 shows the characteristic wing shape of this kite.

This nest located in Bentsen—Rio Grande Valley State Park was not far from the Rio Grande hiking trailhead. When discovered, it contained two nestlings. (The details of the nest tree and nest, along with other nests, will be published elsewhere.) The presumed dark-morph male could have been breeding since at least 1998, and this female may have bred previously. This is, however, the first time an adult dark-morph has been recorded nesting there or anywhere else in the United States.

Interestingly, both chicks in this nest were light morphs (Figs. 8, 9). This is most likely because the gene for dark color morph is recessive, and the adult male is most likely a homozygous light morph. A dark-morph adult and heterozygous light-morph adult would produce equal numbers of dark-morph and light-morph (but heterozygous) chicks, but could, as in this case, have two light-morph chicks. Two dark-morph adults would have only dark-morph chicks. Two heterozygous light-morph adults would average one dark-morph chick for every four chicks. Pairings between homozygous light and heterozygous adults would yield only light-morph young. The chicks of this Texas nest are both heterozygous.

As we learn more about this small population of kites, it will be interesting to find out if there are more dark adults breeding. I welcome any information of breeding Hook-billed Kites in Texas, particularly dark ones.



Four views of the adult female dark-morph Hook-billed Kite near its nest at Bentsen—Rio Grande Valley State Park, Texas in June 2002.
Photographs by William S. Clark.



Figure 5. The mate of the dark-morph female Hook-billed Kite was this typical male light morph. Photograph by William S. Clark.



Figure 6. An adult female light-morph Hook-billed Kite. Photograph by William S. Clark.



Figure 7. An adult female light-morph Hook-billed Kite at Santa Ana N.W.R.. Photograph by William S. Clark.



Figure 8. The nest of the mixed pair of Hook-billed Kites from Bentsen, June 2002. Photograph by William S. Clark.



Figure 9. Both young birds produced in the 2002 Bentsen nest were light-morph birds; one of the newly-fledged youngsters is pictured here. Photograph by William S. Clark.

Acknowledgments

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Figure 1. Eurasian Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*) specimen found dead in Martin County, Indiana, 16 February 2000.



Figure 2. Head of wryneck specimen, showing dark eye stripe, narrow barring on buffy throat, and chisel-like bill.



Figure 3. Lateral view of wryneck specimen, showing general size and dark triangle on back and nape.



Figure 4. The wryneck's rectrices were fresh and undamaged, showing no sign of captivity or wear from long flight.