

Kites with No Strings Attached

By Martin Hagne



Mississippi Kite by Mike Williams

There is a group of very aerobatic, insect eating raptors that call our area home, the kites. They are some of the most graceful raptors, with sleek bodies, long pointed wings, and small rounded heads. We have three species of kites that live in our area, although only one lives here year-round.

The White-Tailed Kite is our year-round resident bird. Here they nest in smaller trees in open grassy fields. Their preferred habitats are savannas, open woodlands, marshes, desert grasslands, partially cleared lands, and cultivated fields. They eat mainly small rodents, but also birds, lizards, and insects on rare occasions. They hunt by facing into the wind and hovering high above the ground while scanning for small animals, moving around and then diving down to grab their prey.

The term “kiting” comes from their ability to face into the wind and hover by fluttering their wings, a behavior so characteristic of these birds it was named after them. Their plumage is a striking white, black and gray with bright red eyes, and their all white namesake tail. White-

tailed Kites are relatively common, but their populations are declined fairly rapidly.

Swallow-tailed Kites begin showing up in mid-February and migrate south for the winter by mid-September, all the way to South America. In our area they live and nest in tall forests near water. They like to build their nests in an exposed site near the top of one of the tallest trees. In general, they breed in swamps, lowland forests, and marshes of the southeastern United States.

Swallow-tailed Kites mostly eat insects, but during the breeding season they also hunt small vertebrates, including tree frogs, lizards, snakes, and nestling birds. They hunt over forests, along rivers, creeks and ponds, catching prey and swallowing their food in flight. They can also swoop into tree tops to glean their prey there. While doing so, they rarely flap their wings, instead soaring, turning tightly, rotating their tail to steer. Sporting a striking black and white plumage, they are told apart by their long, forked tail. Swallow-tailed Kites have lost much of their historic U.S. range, but have been slowly rebuilding their numbers.

Mississippi Kites breed in scattered areas of the southern and central United States. They arrive here around mid-March and are gone by mid-October. They use very different habitats depending on where they are but are also known for nesting right in town and people’s backyards here. Their South American wintering habitat is not yet known. Mississippi Kites nest in almost any tree species, from low trees to very tall ones.

They are known for graceful, acrobatic flight, but also spend time foraging on the ground and in shallow water. They are social birds, often roosting and hunting in groups and nesting close to other pairs. They

eat a variety of foods including insects, frogs, toads, lizards, turtles, snakes, small birds, terrestrial mammals, and bats. With acrobatic maneuvers they extend one or both feet to grab prey and they often eat their meal in flight. They are a bit drabber and uniformed, colored in light and darker grays, than their cousins. Mississippi Kites are fairly common in their range, and populations are most likely stable.

It's always such a thrill to watch these beautiful birds, especially in flight! Enjoy nature!