

Mississippi Kites Are Back!

By Susan Heath

The last week of April and first week of May are peak migration time for the birds that pass through our area each spring. Most of them are on their way to breeding grounds further north but there's one that breeds right here and they have just begun to return.

Mississippi Kites are what is known as a Neotropical migrant. They breed in the southeastern United States and the Great Plains and spend the winter in South America. As with other Neotropical migrants we tend to think of these birds as being home when they are here with us but in fact they spend seven or more months of the year in the southern hemisphere. They usually arrive in our area in late April and depart again in early September. I am always sad to see them go because I enjoy them so much during the long hot summer!

Adult Mississippi Kites are about the same size as a crow but they have long, narrow, pointed wings. Their head is pearly gray and the body is darker gray. They have a pale whitish patch on the rear edge of the inner part of their wings and, as with most kites, have bright red eyes. They are a beautiful bird and if you get the chance to watch them in flight they can keep you entertained for quite a while.

The young birds look quite different as they are more brownish with heavy streaking on their underparts. We are lucky to have these graceful flyers and I always enjoy seeing them floating high above the trees hunting insects. They will also eat frogs, toads, lizards, turtles, snakes, bats, and small mammals and birds.

This species is already paired when they arrive on their breeding grounds and they begin nest-building immediately. They nest high up in almost any tree species but are usually far from the trunk. Their nest is built of twigs and they generally lay two eggs. Both sexes incubate the eggs and feed the nestlings when they hatch. Incubation lasts about 30 days and the chicks fledge in another 30 days. The adults will feed the fledglings for another 15 to 20 days and this is the period when they are most vocal. Their call is a high, thin whistle that sounds something like "phee phew". Be careful though, as we have many talented mockingbirds that are experts at mimicking the kites.

Mississippi Kite range has been expanding over the last 100 years, mostly because of reforestation of areas that were deforested in the 1800's and urbanization which tends to increase their preferred habitat of forested areas with considerable nearby open habitat.

They can be quite territorial when they are nesting and their colonization of urban-suburban areas over the last 50 years has sometimes resulted in aggressive behavior towards humans. This behavior seems most prevalent in the Great Plains though. I've not witnessed it in Texas. If you live in a town with lots of trees, chances are you have Mississippi Kites around your house. Enjoy them while they are here with us!