

American Swallow-tailed Kite

Aug 1912

Independence, Buchanan Co., IA

J. H. Scott

Bailey 1917, Pierce 1930, DuMont 1933

Record Number: 93-CC
Classification: NA

REFERENCES

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42:253-285.

DuMont 1933

VOTE: 5 NA

NA, No description. Secondhand. /thk

Suborder Falcones. Vultures, Falcons, Hawks, Buzzards,

Eagles, Kites, Harriers, etc.

Family BUTEONIDAE. Hawks, Eagles, Kites, etc.

(Genus *Elanoides* Vieillot.

2. *ELANOIDES FORCATUS* (Linn.). 327.

Swallow-tailed Kite.

Field Characters.—A long-winged, fork-tailed, black and white Hawk, resembling a big swallow. Unlike any other Iowa bird of prey. Possessed of remarkable powers of flight; feeding while on the wing.

Description.—Head, neck and rump, white. Back, upper surface of wings and entire tail black. Below, white, including under sur-

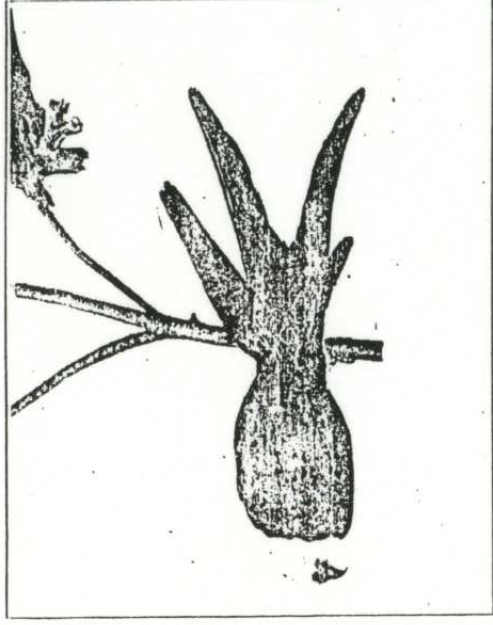


FIG. 16.—The Swallow-tailed Kite.

face of wings. Tail very deeply forked; outer tail feathers more than twice as long as middle ones. Immature birds have dark shaft pencilings on feathers of the head.

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Measurements.—Length 19.50 to 25.50 inches, wing 15.50 to 17.75 inches, tail 12.50 to 14.50 inches.

Range.—The greater part of North and South America, breeding in suitable localities from northern United States southward. At present rare in Iowa. Formerly bred locally in the state.

This beautiful Kite is unique among the Iowa birds of prey in its noticeable swallow-like form, and the grace of its flight. According to Anderson it was formerly "A tolerably common summer resident throughout the state." His further remark that "it is of infrequent occurrence" is confirmed by observations within the last decade.

It is rarely reported even by trained observers and its description by a novice may easily be recognized.

J. A. Allen in an account written in 1868 speaks of it as "common, often seen in considerable numbers, and generally over or near the timber-skirting streams." He also mentions the nesting of this species near Denison, on Boyer river.

Mr. M. E. Peck has noted it in Black Hawk and Benton counties where his father, Mr. George D. Peck, secured several sets of eggs previous to 1877.

Mr. John Cobden, of Cedar Rapids, once witnessed a flight of Swallow-tailed Kites in that vicinity. The birds were moving in a rather compact body, circling in and out, and coming so close to the top of the hill where he was that "they might easily have been knocked down with long poles." On this occasion they seemed not at all shy, and, as it was autumn, they were moving in a southerly direction.

This Kite not only feeds white on the wing but, like the swallow, drinks while skimming over the surface of the water.

The nest is usually placed at some distance from the trunk, high among the smaller branches of tall trees. It is rather rudely constructed of sticks and twigs with a soft lining of such material as wood trees is sometimes used. The eggs, two or three in number, are white, heavily marked, mostly at the larger end, with rich brownish spots.

It would be interesting to know what have been the factors in reducing the numbers of this particular species in Iowa.

Whether its native shyness during the breeding season, the thinning out of the timber, or the increase of fire-arms has been the most important cause is hard to determine. It can scarcely be at-

tributed to a diminution in either the variety or quantity of its usual food.

Of six specimens reported upon by Dr. Fisher in "Hawks and Owls of the United States," all contained insects, two lizards, and one a tree frog. Three of these birds were from Nebraska and one from Minnesota.

The scarcity of the species in recent years has made impossible the examination of many stomachs of these birds. The variety of insect food devoured by an immature male which was brought to the Coe College Museum, September 20, 1903, as listed below, places this bird beyond all question among the farmer's friends.

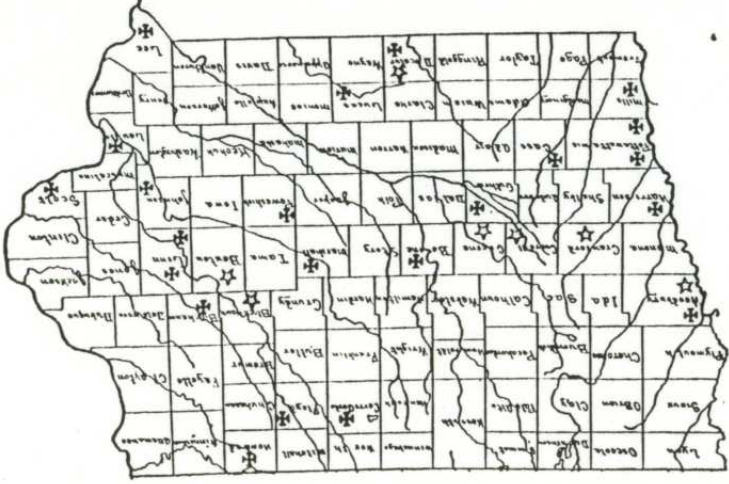


Fig. 17.—Map showing the distribution in Iowa of the Swallow-tailed Kite.

Stomach contents of Swallow-tailed Kite, collected September 20, 1903, Cedar Rapids; sex male (immature):

52 Hemiptera,
5 Field Crickets,
44 Grasshoppers,
4 Ground Beetles,
1 Wasp,
1 Burying Beetle,
1 Mole Cricket,
1 Cotton Bug,
Also a mass of insect fragments.

The last recorded observation of this bird in Iowa was made by Mr. J. H. Scott, of Iowa City, on Wapsipinicon river near Independence in August, 1912.

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backs and *white-barred tails*, and are heavily streaked with dusky below. An easy flying bird, migrating in flocks, sometimes at a great height.

Description.—Adults: On both neck and head grayish above; back slate colored; tips of wings and entire tail black. Below grayish.

Immature: Streaked on the head with black and white; back dusky with rufous edged feathers; tail with three or four incomplete white bars. Below heavily streaked with blackish brown on a buffy background.

Measurements.—Length 13 to 15.50 inches, wing 10.60 to 12.30 inches, tail 6 to 7 inches.

Range.—Southern Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, southern Indiana and South Carolina, south to Texas and Florida; wintering in Florida, southern Texas, and beyond. Accidental in Colorado, South Dakota, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

This Kite is by no means the equal in elegance and beauty of the Swallow-tailed Kite, but is said to share with it remarkable powers of flight.

R. M. Anderson says: "I was for a long time constrained to place it in the hypothetical list for want of a definite authentic record of its capture in Iowa."

Two specimens of the Mississippi Kite were secured in the fall of 1887 near Burlington. They were mounted by Mr. Chas. Buelmer, of that city, and were examined by the writer in the museum of the Iowa Wesleyan University at Mount Pleasant. This is its first recorded occurrence in the state.

An immature female Mississippi Kite collected near Omaha, Nebraska, and purchased for the Coe College Museum, is the first of this species recorded for Nebraska. (The Wilson Bulletin, September, 1915.)

This Kite is said to be fully as gregarious as any of the other Kites and oftentimes may be seen in flocks of twenty or more circling over a favorite hunting ground. It is also said to be not at all shy, and Col. N. S. Goss, in his History of the Birds of Kansas, relates that at one time he shot two of these birds from the same tree, the second one remaining in the tree undisturbed by the discharge of the gun which killed its mate. There is no record of its nesting in Iowa. The eggs are from one

Elianioides forficatus. Cory, C. B., Birds of Illinois and Wisconsin, p. 461, 1909.

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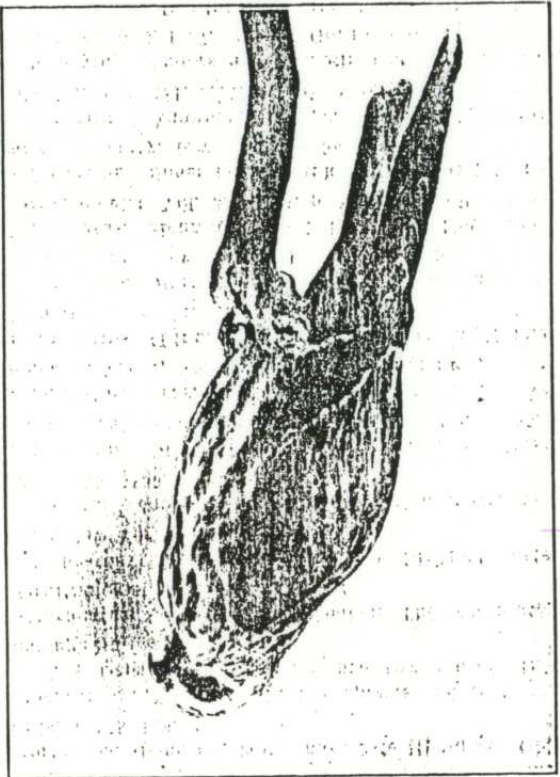


FIG. 18.—The Mississippi Kite, young bird.

3. *ICTINIA MISSISSIPPENSIS* (Wilson). 329.
 (Genus *Ictinia* Vieillot)
 Mississippi Kite.

Field Characters.—A rather small, slaty blue, or lead-colored Kite, with black tail. Immature birds have streaked heads, dark

Pierce, F. J. 1930. Birds of Buchanan County Iowa. Wilson Bull 42:253-285.

*SWALLOW-TAILED KITE. *Elanoides forficatus*. "The last recorded observation of this bird in Iowa was made by Mr. J. H. Scott, of Iowa City, on Wapsipinicon River near Independence in August, 1912."— "The Raptorial Birds of Iowa", by Bert Heald Bailey (1918), p. 53.

Elanoides forficatus forficatus (Linnaeus). Swallow-tailed Kite

Very rare. This beautiful bird was formerly a fairly common summer resident throughout the state, but by 1880, apparently, it was considerably reduced in numbers and was thereafter observed most frequently as a migrant. The last migratory flight of any size is mentioned by W. W. Searles, of Lime Springs, Howard County (Iowa Ornithologist, I, 1895, p. 90) who found them abundant for three days during May, 1888.

Records of this bird in Iowa since 1900 are indeed few. An adult specimen taken during the fall of 1901 by D. J. Bullock in Jasper County, is now in the Bullock collection, Des Moines. An immature male was collected at Cedar Rapids, Linn County, September 20, 1903. It is now in the Coe College collection. Another taken in Sheridan Township, Poweshiek County, September, 1907, is in the collection at Grinnell College. The collector is unknown. Spurrell (1917) says: "Mr. Lee reported the swallow-tailed kite as rare, with the last one seen in 1908." Nauman records (Palimpsest, V, p. 137) seeing one flying over the town of Sigourney during the summer of 1910. Bailey (1918) states: "The last recorded observation of this bird in Iowa was made by J. H. Scott, of Iowa City, on Wapsipinicon River near Independence in August, 1912." One of the two specimens of Swallow-tailed Kite in the Shaffer collection, Jefferson County Library, Fairfield, was killed by B. F. McElhinny in 1913, in Jefferson County. Fenton (1923-24) records one seen by C. H. Belanski and himself at Hackberry Grove, Cerro Gordo County, May 28, 1916. Myron H. Swenk records (Wilson Bull., XLIV, p. 182) a specimen killed by a farmer early in July, 1931 along the West Nishnabotna River, a few miles southwest of Oakland, Pottawattamie County, Iowa. The specimen was mounted by Karl Schwarz of Omaha, and is now in Swenk's collection, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Besides the five Iowa specimens mentioned above there are several others taken prior to 1900. One in the U. S. National Museum, Washington, D. C., was taken at Sioux City by D. H. Talbot. Another Talbot specimen was collected by J. F. Baker at Sioux City, Woodbury County, April 8, 1883. It is a male, and is in the collection of the University of Iowa Museum. A mounted specimen, taken by J. B. Atkins in Jasper County, is in the Parker Museum at Grinnell College. Three specimens from Scott County, without dates, are in the collection of the Davenport Public Museum. Two of the specimens were taken by S. C. Bowman and the other by W. L. Allen. A second specimen in the Shaffer collection, Fairfield, was probably taken in Fairfield County by J. M. Shaffer, sometime before 1900. Fenton (1923-24) states that there is a specimen in the Miles collection, Charles City, which was probably taken in Floyd County. Spurrell (1917) records that one in the H. B. Smith collection, Odebolt, was taken in Ida County.

Bailey (1918) recorded this species as a former breeder in Woodbury, Crawford, Carroll, Greene, Decatur, Blackhawk, and Benton counties.

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