

INCIDENTAL CAPTURE OF AN ALTERNATIVE PREY BY A DIETARY SPECIALIST, THE SNAIL KITE (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*)

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Referred to as a dietary specialist (Beissinger et al. 1994, Cattau et al. 2010), the endangered Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*) is a medium-sized raptor found in central and southern Florida (Cottam and Knappen 1939). Its diet consists almost exclusively of apple snails (*Pomacea* spp.) (Sykes et al. 1995). Despite being dietary specialists, Snail Kites have been observed consuming a variety of alternative prey including small turtles (Sykes and Kale 1974, Beissinger 1988, 1990), mammals (Sykes and Kale 1974), a Speckled Perch (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*), and crayfish (*Procambarus* spp.) (Bennetts et al. 1994). Snail Kites forage during the day and capture food near the water's surface (Snyder and Snyder 1969); therefore, crayfish in particular would seem to be an unlikely prey source for Snail Kites as they are nocturnal, cryptic, and benthic (Momot et al. 1978, Davis and Huber 2007). Furthermore, crayfish are vigilant (Davis and Huber 2007) and highly mobile relative to apple snails. Here we describe the incidental capture of crayfish by Snail Kites in southern Florida.

We performed field observations in southern Florida from May 2010 to June 2012 as part of an ongoing study to monitor foraging activity of Snail Kites. Observations were conducted using a high-powered scope mounted on an airboat, which gave us the ability to record detailed accounts of the subjects' behavior. The vast majority of prey consumed were apple snails (>99%); however, we recorded two occasions in which crayfish were captured while inside an apple snail shell by adult, male Snail Kites in Big Cypress National Preserve (BCY) and Water Conservation Area-3A (WCA-3A). The first capture occurred in BCY on 20 October 2011 at 0941. The vegetation near the capture consisted of *Eleocharis* spp. and *Cladium jamaicensis*. The second capture occurred at WCA-3A on 4 May 2012 at 0923. The vegetation near the capture was *C. jamaicensis*. On both occasions, Snail Kites perched with the snail shell, removed the crayfish from the snail shell, and consumed small portions of meat from the ventral side of the abdomen and cephalothorax.

Several studies suggest that the use of alternative prey by Snail Kites occurs during periods of snail scarcity, such as severe droughts and cold weather (Beissinger 1990, Bennetts et al. 1994, Sykes and Kale 1974, Takekawa and Beissinger 1983). While this may be true in some cases, our observations suggest that the Snail Kites may have inadvertently captured crayfish. Therefore, the incorporation of crayfish in the Snail Kite's diet may be more associated with crayfish occupying apple snail shells rather than Snail Kites seeking an alternative prey source during periods of snail scarcity. These observations identify a potential misconception regarding prey selection by Snail Kites, which may have implications in future conservation efforts.

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