Common Name: SWALLOW-TAILED KITE

Scientific Name: *Elanoides forficatus* Linnaeus

Other Commonly Used Names: Forked-tailed chicken hawk, forked-tailed hawk, American swallow-tailed kite, forked-tailed kite, swallow-tailed hawk, snake hawk.

Previously Used Names: *Falco forficatus*

Family: Accipitridae

Rarity Ranks: G5/S2

State Legal Status: Rare

Federal Legal Status: Not listed

Federal Wetland Status: N/A

Description: This species has distinct black and snow-white plumage unlike that of any other bird of prey found in the state. It is 48-61 cm (19-24 in) in length with a long deeply forked tail that is black in color. The wings are long, narrow, and pointed, black above and black and white below. The head, neck, chest, abdomen, and vent are white. Feet and bill are gray. The sexes are indistinguishable by plumage or size. Known for its extraordinary aerial grace, it can be distinguished even at great distances by its unique silhouette and seemingly effortless flight. This bird rarely flaps its wings but continually rotates its tail as it flies low over forests and fields. Prior to fall migration, young of the year can be distinguished from adult birds by noticeably shorter tails and lack of wing feather molt.

Similar Species: The adult Mississippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) could be confused with the swallow-tailed kite at a distance, particularly under poor light conditions. It has a light gray head, medium gray upper and lower parts, dark wingtips, and a dark wedge-shaped tail with squared-off trailing edge.

Habitat: Nesting activity is associated with wetland habitats throughout peninsular Florida and with major river systems and large wetlands of the Lower Coastal Plain from South Carolina to eastern Texas. This kite nests in trees that emerge above the surrounding forest, which in Georgia are typically very large pines found in small "pine islands" within floodplain or riparian forest, or in older stands of pine forest adjacent to floodplains of large rivers or tributary creeks. Foraging habitats include bottomland forests, cypress and mixed cypress-hardwood swamps, hardwood hammocks, pine flatwoods, pine forests bordering riparian areas, freshwater and brackish marshes, wet prairies, sloughs, and pastures.

Diet: Insects such as dragonflies, butterflies, and beetles; snakes, frogs, lizards, nestling birds and less frequently bats, fruit, and small fish.

Life History: Swallow-tailed kites are present in Georgia only during the spring and summer. After arriving in mid to late March from the wintering grounds in South America, adults establish territories and begin nest building. Kites tend to be vocal in the vicinity of their nests and if seen carrying sticks, Spanish moss, or even food items, they are likely near a nest site. Nests are made of small sticks loosely held together and lined with lichens and Spanish moss. In late March and April, females lay an average of two eggs that are smooth and creamy white or white with brown markings. Incubation begins as soon as the first egg is laid, and hatching is asynchronous. The incubation period lasts 24-28 days, with the responsibility of incubating the eggs shared by both sexes but predominantly by the female. Fledging occurs 35-42 days after hatching. Only one nesting attempt per nesting season is known. Nest monitoring in Georgia from 1999 to 2009 documented nest success rates of 30–86 percent, with nests in the Altamaha River drainage appearing more successful than those in the smaller river systems. Nest distribution appears to be somewhat clumped in "loose neighborhoods," and one or two extra non-breeding adults are present at most nests beginning with territory establishment. The relationship of these birds to the breeders is unknown. Communal night roosts of several to 30 kites are common during nesting, and large pre-migration communal roosts have been described in Florida with as many as 1,250 swallow-tailed kites observed near Lake Okeechobee prior to fall migration. The largest pre-migration roost found in Georgia was 100 birds. Kites are frequently seen foraging in groups of 3-20 birds or more, often with Mississippi kites. These large, graceful birds most often catch and eat their prey while in flight. Most swallow-tailed kites depart the U.S. for the wintering grounds by mid-September.

Survey Recommendations: Ground searches around known nest clusters from previous years should be a priority. Helicopter surveys along major Atlantic drainage Coastal Plain river courses in April and early May to document occupied nests are a priority. Gulf drainage Coastal Plain rivers near the state's southern border should also be searched since there is some evidence that significant nesting activity might occur in this region as well. In addition, aerial and ground searches for foraging and roosting aggregations in July and August should be made.

Range: The main breeding range in the U.S. is contained in just seven states and is restricted to riparian habitats throughout peninsular Florida and associated with major river systems of the lower coastal plains of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Recently a few nests have been documented in Arkansas, and swallow-tailed kites have been observed during the breeding season in coastal North Carolina. Breeding Bird Atlas data show that in Georgia this species occurs most commonly along the larger Atlantic drainage rivers, particularly the Altamaha, Savannah, Ogeechee, and Satilla rivers, but also in the Okefenokee Swamp and at sites scattered along the southern border of the state. In 2006 nests were discovered in the Withlacoochee and Alapaha river systems as far west as western Brooks County, and in the Ocmulgee and Oconee river systems as far north as southern Wheeler County. These locations are the farthest north and west this species has bee documented nesting in the state. Breeding populations also occur in southern Mexico and Central America and resident populations occur in South America. The North and Central American breeding populations winter in South America, with Georgia birds traveling to Brazil and Paraguay. The wintering area for the state's swallow-tailed kites was only recently discovered after six adult birds were fitted with satellite transmitters.

Threats: Prior to the early 1900s, nesting may have occurred in as many as 21 states including most of Florida, the southeastern U.S. coastal region, and throughout the Mississippi Valley as far north as Minnesota. A sharp decline from 1880 to 1940 resulted in the current, greatly reduced breeding range. Suggested reasons for this decline include agricultural development, logging of bottomland forests, and shooting. Loss of nesting, foraging, and roosting habitat from drainage of marshes and conversion of bottomland forests are the major threats to the species today. Although nesting kites are relatively inaccessible and somewhat tolerant of human activity, roosting kites do not tolerate high levels of direct disturbance and are vulnerable to harassment. The large pine trees this species uses as nest sites in Georgia are very valuable for saw timber and harvest of these trees could lead to a shortage of suitable nest sites and subsequent reductions in the state's breeding population. Common nest predators include great horned owls, raccoons, and rat snakes.

Georgia Conservation Status: Clayhole Swamp, Sansavilla, Penholoway Swamp, Townsend, Little Satilla, and Bullard Creek WMAs, Ft. Stewart, and University of Georgia and Georgia Land Trust properties along the Satilla River.

Conservation and Management Recommendations: The U. S. breeding population is estimated at 800-1,200 pairs, or about 3,500-5,000 individuals at the end of the breeding season. Florida likely supports the majority of the population with probably no more than 100-150 pairs in each of the other southeastern states in the current breeding range. Areas possibly as large as 40,000 ha (100,000 acres) containing diverse riparian forest, upland pine edge, and open foraging areas are required to support viable populations. Areas capable of supporting kite populations now and in the future, especially associated with large river and creek systems, must be identified and cooperatively managed to provide suitable habitat conditions for nesting and foraging. Key roosting sites must also be protected. Conservation of swallow-tailed kites must involve lands actively managed for forestry and other uses in addition to wilderness areas and other public lands. A regional approach will best address the long-term needs of the species.

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E.J. Williams, 1999: original account
D. Swan, 2010: Breeding Bird Atlas species account
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