

## Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*



**Folk Name:** Blue Hawk

**Status:** Migrant and Breeder

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Hardwoods near creeks, or rivers, forages in open fields

The Mississippi Kite is the more common of our two kite species. It averages about 14 inches in length, which is a full 8 inches smaller than the Swallow-tailed Kite. It is a slender bird, and adults have a pale head, black tail, an overall bluish appearance above, and a light-gray look below. At times, white secondary feathers can be observed when the bird is in flight. It is only found in the Carolinas during and after breeding season. It winters in South America.

In the 1800s, the Mississippi Kite was a common breeding bird in the South Carolina Coastal Plain from Charleston southward. Like many other raptor species, it experienced decades of breeding range reduction and a rapid population decline during the early 1900s. Fortunately, in South Carolina starting in the 1950s, ornithologists began to document a small population increase and a slow northward expansion of both this kite's breeding range and its post-breeding dispersal range. By the 1970s, Mississippi Kites were being reported in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina and they were seen there during breeding season in 1972.

Robin Carter sighted a Mississippi Kite in Anson County on July 12, 1975, and counted 11 there a couple weeks later on 3 August. He observed a group of 14 a dozen miles away in Cheraw during the following summer. There was speculation these birds were part of



J F M A M J J A S O N D

a breeding population in nearby Bennettsville, SC. On August 16, 1979, ornithologist Douglas McNair observed two adults along the Pee Dee River in southeastern Anson County and suspected breeding in the immediate area.

By 1981, breeding was suspected in North Carolina in both the Roanoke River region and near Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge with possible breeding along the Waccamaw and Lumber rivers as well. Merrill Lynch, a biologist with the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, believed these kites represented "a recent range expansion as a result of the 'spillover effect' from population increases further south in South Carolina" and that the expansion of breeding into North Carolina was "not a reoccupation of former range." In the summer of 1985, Doug McNair suspected breeding along the Pee Dee River from the North Carolina line south to Cheraw,



Adult Mississippi Kite with young in suburban Charlotte. (Phil Fowler)



Fledgling Mississippi Kite. (Phil Fowler)

and a nest was reported in Cheraw in Chesterfield County in 1985 and in 1986.

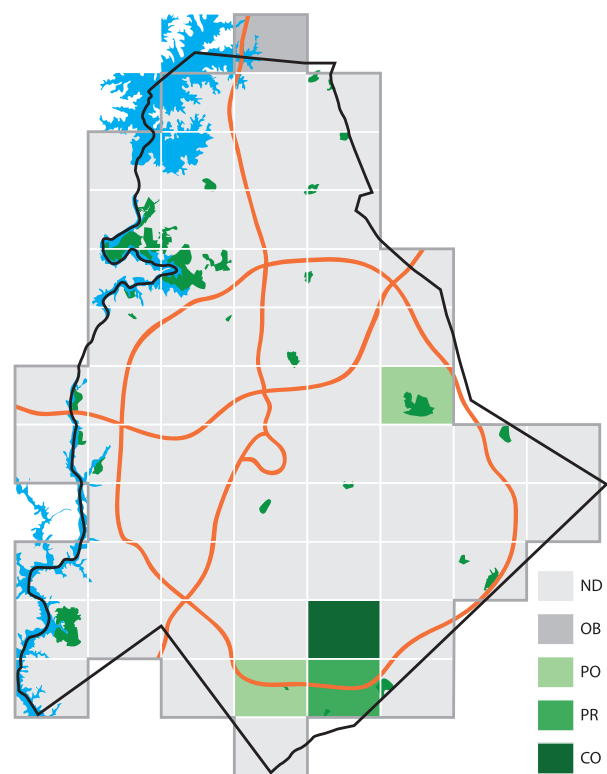
It wasn't until 1995, however, that the first occupied nest of a Mississippi Kite was actually confirmed in North Carolina. It was discovered by Mary Jane Wells and Hal Broadfoot on 23 July in the town of Laurinburg in Scotland County. The nest was in the top of a tall sweetgum tree beside First Presbyterian Church in a residential neighborhood. This site was about 15 miles north of the breeding location near Bennettsville and only 30 miles east of Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge. The Mississippi Kite has slowly continued to expand as a breeder in North Carolina since this first nesting confirmation.

On October 6, 1983, David Wright observed the first Mississippi Kite ever recorded in Mecklenburg County. He sighted an adult bird in the Town of Davidson. He studied the bird carefully for several minutes and then wrote up a detailed description of the account which was published in *The Chat*. On August 2, 1984, Bill Hilton Jr. watched one in York County. In 1989, David Wright reported the second sighting of this species in Mecklenburg County. This time, he watched a group of 13 kites as they flew over University City Lake during fall migration on 15 September.

There were several reports of Mississippi Kites around the Central Carolinas in the 1990s. David Davis watched a pair soaring over the town of Cheraw and near the river on July 4, 1993. Robin Carter found one in York County on May 16, 1995. Dick Burr reported Mississippi Kites at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge on April 20, 1996, and a year later on May 17, 1997. There were also multiple sightings along the edge of the region east of the Pee Dee River near known nesting sites.

The number of sightings increased in and around the region after the turn of the twenty-first century, and Mississippi Kite is now being observed annually here. Our earliest reported arrival date is 12 March, and our latest reported departure date is 3 October. Most birds are reported from April through September. Groups of more than 20 have been seen during post-breeding dispersal. Since 2001, birds have been reported across the region from the Pee Dee River in the east to McDowell County in the west, and from Spartanburg, Laurens, and Fairfield counties in the south to Iredell in the north.

In 2009, everyone was surprised when a probable nest site was discovered in the suburbs of southern Mecklenburg County. Richard Fletcher and Ken Kneidel found a pair next to the campus of Providence Springs Elementary School off Providence Road. The birds stayed throughout the breeding season and were regularly seen in the top of a tall sweetgum tree. In August 2009, two young were seen there with the adults. In 2010, four kites were seen in the same location, but breeding was never confirmed. Finally in 2014, Lucy Quintilliano confirmed a Mississippi Kite nest in a tall sweetgum tree in a neighborhood about 3 ½ miles due north of the school site. The birds are believed to have successfully raised at least one young bird there during at least two nesting seasons.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Very Local (PR/1, CO/1)*