

Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus*



Folk Name: Fork-tailed Hawk, Sky Hawk

Status: Migrant

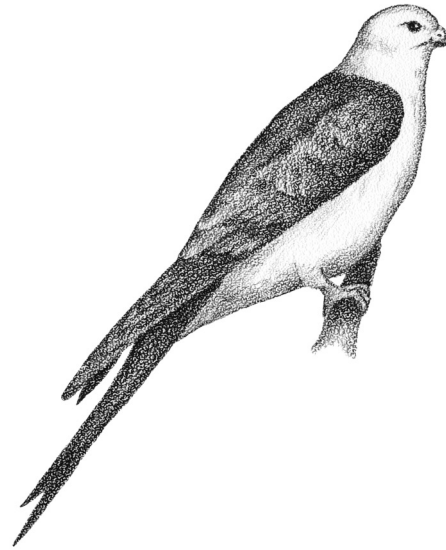
Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Seen in flight or perched in tops of trees near marshes or fields

The Swallow-tailed Kite is one of our most spectacularly beautiful birds of prey. Its contrasting, formal, black-and-white colors, its long pointed wings and long forked tail, distinguish this elegant bird from all of our other raptors. Like its cousin, the much smaller Mississippi Kite, it is well known for its “kiting” behavior, effortlessly swooping, circling, sailing, gliding, and soaring through the sky in search of aerial insects. The Swallow-tailed Kite is a large bird, and at 22 inches in length, it averages an inch or two larger than our common Red-tailed Hawk. It is only found in the Carolinas during and after breeding season, and it spends the winter season in South America. It is a highly unusual visitor here in the Central Carolinas.

In a 1972 review of the status of this species, Mark Simpson states: “Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Swallow-tailed Kite was widely distributed as a breeding bird in the southeastern United States.” In the late 1800s, this kite was designated as “rare” in Chester County by Leverett Loomis. However, Loomis stated that prior to wide-spread deforestation it was believed to have been “much more abundant” in the Piedmont of South Carolina. In 1910, Arthur T. Wayne wrote that it had once been “very abundant” in the South Carolina Coastal Plain. In North Carolina at the turn of the twentieth century, it was considered a regular summer resident in the southeastern Coastal Plain and a transient in the mountains after breeding. Nesting was suspected in Craven County from around 1905–1911, but it was never confirmed.

By the mid-1900s, the Swallow-tailed Kite was hard to find anywhere in either of the Carolinas. In fact, despite its designation as a summer resident, the Swallow-tailed Kite had been formally recorded fewer than 20 times in North Carolina as of 1960. At least one record was overlooked. On August 10, 1921, a Swallow-tailed Kite was shot and killed by Walter Sneed in Union County, NC, 3 miles north of Monroe. This curious find drew a crowd of people interested in helping to identify the bird. Three days later after much review, specific details of the specimen were published in *The Monroe Journal*. The description noted that the bird’s “breast, underparts of the wing, head and neck were snow white, the back, upper part of the wings, and tail being of a glossy purplish black.” The “long and deeply forked” tail and the bird’s large size were specifically highlighted as well. This report



provided an extraordinary first record for the Central Carolina region.

In the 1949 edition of *South Carolina Bird Life*, authors Sprunt and Chamberlain designated the Swallow-tailed Kite as “uncommon” and noted their range as “formerly over most of the state, now chiefly in swampy areas of the eastern section.” Indeed, this raptor had become so rare that on May 11, 1953, Burnham Chamberlain made a special trip to McClellanville to search for it, writing: “any bird student would welcome the opportunity to see one of these graceful birds.” The trip was successful and Chamberlain later excitedly wrote “How would you like to see not just one Swallow-tail, but four or five, with a Mississippi Kite thrown in for good measure? Better yet, how would you like to have three Swallow-tails and one Mississippi in your field glass at the same moment?” In 1976, the Swallow-tailed Kite was designated a state-listed Endangered species in South Carolina.

Today, the Swallow-tailed Kite population in South Carolina has rebounded from its historic low ebb, and nesting has expanded from the Coastal Plain into a few areas in central South Carolina. In July 2012, Phil and Jan Fowler of Concord, NC, watched a flock of about 200 kites foraging for insects above fields in Millett, SC. This spot was about 120 miles due west of McClellanville where Chamberlain excitedly observed his five birds in 1953. Also in 2012, John Carpenter and David Allen formally documented the first nest of a Swallow-tailed Kite in North Carolina, over a century after nesting was first suspected. The nest was situated in the top of a cypress tree on the edge of the Cape Fear River in Bladen County.

After breeding, Swallow-tailed Kites from the southeast coast often disperse to the north and west of their breeding grounds into the western Piedmont and mountains of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Reports are generally received from mid-July through September. Sightings of the Swallow-tailed Kite in the Carolina Piedmont have been reported with increasing frequency over the past several decades, and we now have almost two dozen reports of this bird visiting the Central Carolinas.

One created quite a stir in the town of Chester in August 1967:

Residents of South Carolina are having a treat! A Swallow-tailed Kite was first observed over the business district of Chester on Tuesday, August 1. It was seen on August 2, 3, and 4 also over the city. Definite identification was made by members of the CBC, National Audubon Society, and The Wilson Society.

This beautiful bird is truly one of the most graceful, and has thrilled many persons who stopped to watch it with dives, turns, and swoops. Occasionally, it seems to hover just over the tallest buildings down town, giving everyone a chance to study it in detail. Then it soars to such heights that it can hardly be seen, only to dive and turn on its way to treetop heights again.

Despite the fact that the City of Chester is already a bird Sanctuary, local CBC members requested radio station WGCD to ask publicly that care be taken not to destroy this rare visitor to our city. The description of the bird and its aerial activity was given, and this has resulted in quite a few bird watchers lining up on the sidewalks to view this unusual spectacle.

David Burney reported one from New London, in Stanly County, on August 31, 1976. This bird lingered in that general area until 20 September. Bill Scott saw one flying in Union County, NC, about 7 ½ miles north of Monroe on August 9, 1985. It was 17 years before the next bird was reported. Matthew Williams identified one in Union County, NC, on August 24, 2002. Since then, the frequency of sightings in the region has increased.

Judy Walker and some Mecklenburg Audubon members observed a Swallow-tailed Kite in flight over McAlpine Greenway Park in Charlotte on April 24, 2004. It was a quick fly-by and Walker later noted that “it was just dumb luck that we saw it.” The following year, a Swallow-tailed Kite was seen flying along the Pee Dee River between Anson and Richmond counties on April 1, 2005. Dumb luck apparently struck again in Charlotte on May 18, 2005, when biologists working at the Conservation Science Office found one kiting directly over their roof. They had just said their last goodbyes to one of their biologists who was heading to a new job in

Missouri, when he came running back in the building screaming for everyone to get outside to see this bird. The kite flew by in less than 2 minutes and was not seen again.

Betty O’Leary, a longtime raptor rehabilitator at the Carolina Raptor Center, saw two Swallow-tailed Kites flying over a field just off Highway 73 in southeastern Lincoln County on August 9, 2008. These kites stayed at least through 12 August and were relocated and photographed by other observers several times. Simon Harvey reported one in Spartanburg County on August 15, 2009. One surprising and intriguing report was submitted to *The Chat* by longtime birder Dennis Burnette. On June 18, 2010, which is late breeding season, Burnette observed a Swallow-tailed Kite in flight carrying a snake near Richfield in Stanly County. The area has habitat suitable for nesting, but no further reports from the area have been received.

Recent reports of Swallow-tailed Kite in the region include a bird George Andrews watched fly over Cane Creek Park in Union County, NC, on August 9, 2010. Gail B. Ice reported a pair flying over the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden in Gaston County on August 2, 2011. About that same time, a kite was photographed by refuge staff flying over Pee Dee NWR in Anson County, and there was one second-hand report of a kite flying over Locust, NC. On August 17, 2011, Dwayne Martin photographed a pair of kites in Burke County, about 5 miles south of Morganton. Three Swallow-tailed Kites were later seen together in that same area providing our highest one-day count.

Linda Long reported one in Union County, NC, on May 20, 2012. Ric Porter watched one in York County, flying upstream above the Catawba River, on July 19, 2012. Andy Eller saw one in Rowan County on July 20, 2012, and exclaimed: “There is no mistaking that tail!” Steven Biggers watched one in flight in York County while



Swallow-tailed Kite, Mecklenburg County. (Gary P. Carter)

he was driving on Highway 321 on May 8, 2015. Matthew Harrell photographed a Swallow-tailed Kite soaring over his house near Matthews in Union County, NC, on May 18, 2015. This bird was high in the air heading north towards the Mecklenburg County line, only about 3 miles away. In 2016, one observer reported one above East Lincoln Animal Hospital in Lincoln County on 12 July, and another observer reported seeing one in flight over I-40 in Iredell County on 3 September. Lastly, on July 28,

2017, Jim Guyton sighted one in flight over southwest Charlotte. Guyton remarked: “Even my non-birding passenger was impressed.”

The Swallow-tailed Kite is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. Despite recent expansion in some parts of the Southeast, it is considered a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action.