

At our first sighting of this nest, the chick sported an all-white downy coat, plus a dark eye-ring. Two weeks later, on 25 July 1998, the chick had gained most of its first-year, heavily streaked plumage. We noticed the parents remained close by even though they did not feed it.

I have not seen much evidence of this species north of St. Louis. Most of its nests are in floodplain habitat and it feeds mostly on insects as well as amphibians and small snakes. I have sometimes seen flocks of 20 gleaning large insects from the air. With noticeable skill, the kites skim grassy meadows, glide along tree tops, or circle high in the sky. Mississippi Kites also feed on annual cicadas, grasshoppers, and dragonflies (See Bohlen 1989 and Bent 1937).

The species has been seen well north of its breeding range in Illinois, especially during years of 13-year and 17-year periodical cicada (*Magica sp.*) outbreaks. These over-migrants or wanderers are usually first-year birds in juvenile plumage and are usually seen during late spring or summer (Bohlen 1989).

The famous naturalist, John J. Audubon, observed the Mississippi Kite while living in Louisiana. He admired its grace and flying skill. Seeing an adult who was guarding its half-grown offspring, Audubon shot them both. Another time, he instructed a boy to climb a tall tree to collect its eggs, then destroy the nest.

Habitat destruction through the years has severely reduced this species' numbers.

The Mississippi Kite winters in Central and northern South America but returns by late April or early May to breed. Its range extends widely across the southern states, from the Carolinas to Texas and Oklahoma, in parts of Kansas and Arizona, and northward through the central Mississippi Valley. Occasional nest sightings occur to eastern Kansas and

north of St. Louis.

It nests in tall trees such as cottonwoods, which are often found in mature bottomland forests close to water. Most nests are placed 40 to 60 feet high in a fork, somewhat hidden from view. The crude collection of sticks and twigs, sometimes with leaves attached, resembles the nests of crows or Red-tail Hawks. Incubation for the two to three eggs takes about 31 days. Fledglings leave the nest in another 30 days. (See Hardin et al 1977 for a thorough description of this species' nesting habits in Union County, Illinois.) Mississippi Kites migrate south by the end of August. Some immatures lag for several weeks more.

Finding Mississippi Kites in Illinois

The Mississippi Kite is best found during its nesting season, early May through July. Single individuals or pairs can be seen rather commonly at isolated nesting sites along the Mississippi River, from Cairo to St. Louis. Included are St. Louis suburbs including Webster Groves and University City (Webster Groves Nature Study Society 1998). (Remember, though, if you see the kite in St. Louis, you can't count it on your Illinois list.) One reliable nesting site is at

Fort Kaskaskia State Park, nine miles north of Chester, off Highway 3.

The largest population of nesting Mississippi Kites in Illinois is along the levee road on the Union County Conservation Area (De Vore in press), as well as fewer numbers in a few other areas in Union, Alexander, and Jackson counties (Robinson 1996).

After nesting, individual adults or immatures might be seen elsewhere along the major rivers and streams until late August, when the species migrates toward Texas.

Observers in open country near major streams should look for a slender, falcon-like bird, about 14 inches long with a 36-inch wing span. At a distance, its light gray head and underparts look almost white. Its shoulders and back are medium-gray, while its dark primaries and indented tail are almost black. The dark eye-ring and blood-red eye are definitive if seen at close range. The immature Mississippi Kite is heavily streaked over most of its body and its dark tail has three light bands.

This kite is often missed because it sometimes catches insects at very high elevations. Look high in the sky for the whitish head and dark back, wingtips, or tail. You will admire its aerial skills and distinctive looks.

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