

# A record count of Mississippi Kites in Southern Illinois

with notes on other Illinois high counts,  
prey items and breeding areas

by Steven D. Bailey

On 24 May 2003 Sheryl De Vore and I recorded Mississippi Kites (*Ictina mississippiensis*) in unusually large numbers, mainly at two locations in Alexander County, Illinois. While observing three Black-necked Stilts along Illinois Route 3, just west of where Illinois Route 3 turns west toward Horse-shoe Lake Conservation Area (and continues north as Illinois Route 127), 18 Mississippi Kites appeared over the flooded, fallow field on the north side of the road. They first came as singles and then in small groups until all were crisscrossing back and forth over the field and nearby bottomland forest. The birds appeared to be hawking insects, and one chased a dragonfly. A few times birds flew in a steep, fast stoop toward the ground after aerial insect prey, but they captured most of their prey by coursing back and forth across the field in a series of flap and glide flights. Most if not all of the birds appeared to be in adult breeding plumage. Although areas just to the east and west of this location are known to have one or two breeding pairs of kites most years, this number of kites at this location is unprecedented.

Continuing northwestward approximately 13 miles along

*Mississippi Kite pair at Thebes. 27 May 1989. Note the bird on the left has a banded tail indicating it is a subadult. Photo by Eric Walters.*

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Illinois Route 3 to Thebes, Illinois (also in Alexander Co.), we noted a single kite soaring right above the small town, located on a wooded bluff above and immediately east of the Mississippi River. Upon leaving town to the north, we were amazed to see a large flock of kites kiting back and forth, right above the east bank of the river. Although it was difficult to count the birds as they freely mingled with one another and constantly crisscrossed back and forth among each other, we noted at least 65 birds at this one location. Upon getting out of our car at a small parking lot right along the edge of the river, we immediately noticed that there was a very large hatch-out of some type of flying insect. The rocks along the edge of the river were literally covered with these insects, which were later identified by entomologist Ed DeWalt of the Illinois Natural History Survey as *Hydropsyche bidens*, a type of net-spinning caddisfly, which is widely distributed and fairly common in Illinois. These insects were everywhere here, with many constantly landing on our clothes as well as on and in my car. Thousands to tens of thousands were on the surrounding ground and vegetation. This was undoubtedly what the kites were feeding on, although the birds were feeding high enough (125-250 feet) that all we could see were the birds grabbing something very small in their feet and bringing it up to their