

beaks to eat. The birds made their way along the edge of the river, north along and across Route 3 for about 200 yards or so, before working their way back south and disappearing.

We saw one additional kite approximately 17 miles farther north along the Clear Creek Ditch Levee Road, at their traditional breeding area on the Union County State Wildlife Refuge, for a one-day total of 84 Mississippi Kites. The closest area with flocks this large or larger have been in northwestern Tennessee at Reelfoot Lake where 80 birds were seen (see Evans 1981), and 197 birds farther south in Tennessee at Island 13 on the Mississippi River (Robinson 1990). However, foraging flocks of more than 25 birds are not unusual at any time of the year, including during the breeding season (Parker 1999). Evans (1981) noted that foraging groups of kites in southern Illinois often form spontaneously from birds arriving in all directions, and flocks dissipate after feeding over a location for 30 to 50 minutes. She noted flocks over hay fields as they were harvested as well as forests as they were logged. The kites were seemingly feeding on the insects flushed by these disturbances.

### Thebes kites

Interestingly, I also had a flock of 52 kites at the Thebes location on 9 May 2003, just two weeks earlier. This is apparently a regular gathering point for flocks of this species; Sheryl DeVore and I also witnessed a group of 35 kites at the exact same Thebes location along the Mississippi River on 28 May 2000, and I had a flock of 13 there on 13 June 1999. The normal arrival time in spring in Illinois for this species is the last week in April or first week in May. As few pairs nest much farther north in Illinois, such large gatherings on May 9th are likely made up mainly of local breeders. I have noticed singles and small groups in the Thebes area yearly during the breeding season for

several years (1990-2003) while conducting research in the area, and Evans (1981) listed Thebes Gap (approximately 0.8 mile south of Thebes) as the second greatest breeding concentration of kites in southern Illinois with 16 birds recorded there in 1981 (which included 14 birds there on 4 June made up of an estimated breeding population of six pairs including two actual, one suspected, and four potential pairs). Breeding was last documented in the Thebes area on 27 May 1989, when five birds including two pairs and a nest (likely with eggs) being incubated were located one mile south of Thebes (E. Walters, pers. comm.; see photo). Interestingly, this pair consisted of one subadult and one adult; the photo shows the subadult on the left with the telltale banded tail. Other flocks of these birds found in this general location include 23 birds on 29 May 1999 (Clyne 1999), 16 on 10 June 1994 (Kleen 1995), 8 on 8 June 1997 (Kleen 1998) and 7 on 25 June 1993 (Kleen 1994). One was seen from this location as early as 27 April 2000 (Clyne 2000).

### Breeding area high counts

Most other state high counts come from the Union County Refuge, usually considered the main breeding location in Illinois (including 36% of all known nesting birds, estimated at 40 birds and 15 pairs in 1981 [Evans 1981]). Foraging flocks of 36 and 39 birds were noted at Union County Refuge in June 1977 (Hardin et al. 1977, Robinson 1996), and 35 and 40 birds at Union County Refuge in the summers of 1980 and 1981, respectively, (Evans 1981), with more recent maximum counts of kites there of 21 birds on 6 July 1988 (Kleen 1989), 22 on 24 June 1999 (Brock 1999), and 41 birds on 21 May 1994 (Chapel 1994). Other large, single-site maximum counts include 26 birds (adult and immature) at Olive Branch (near Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area in Alexander County) on 29

July 1995 (Kleen 1996), 20 birds at Oakwood Bottoms (Jackson County.), 18 June, 1999 (Kleen 2000), and 10 birds at Pomona (Jackson County) on 18 May 2002 (Clyne 2002). Many of these likely involve single-flock foraging groups on or birds very near their breeding areas. Large feeding aggregations are common during the summer breeding season over this species' range including flocks of 50-100 birds noted in Mississippi and 75-80 birds in Arkansas (James and Neal 1986, Turcotte and Watts 1999). As many as 36 have been seen in such flocks at the northern edge of their breeding range in North Carolina (Bolen and Flores 1993).

The only other places other than the Thebes area, Pomona area and Union County Refuge, where this species has bred with any regularity in recent years is along the Cache River just east of Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area, in Alexander County, Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area, near (in?) Trail of Tears State Forest (Union County), Oakwood Bottoms, Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge (Pulaski County), Mermet Lake Conservation Area, Fort Massac State Park and Metropolis (in town; pers. comm. F. Bennett) in Massac County, in the Heron Pond-Little Black Slough State Natural Area and Grassy Slough Preserve (Johnson County), and at Ft. Kaskaskia State Historic Site (including Reily Lake; see Evans 1981) in Randolph County. Most if not all of these locations only involved one to three pairs. Scattered pairs breed or may breed occasionally as far north along the Mississippi River as Long Island north of Quincy (Adams County), and Red's Landing (Calhoun County) and Stump Lake (Jersey County) along the Illinois River. Birds are occasionally noted in summer along the Mississippi River at the St. Mary's River mouth and near Turkey Bluffs State Fish and Wildlife Area near Chester (Randolph County). Southern Alexander County sites that formerly had