

Subadult birds: nest helpers and wanderers

It is also interesting that these large groups of kites often contain at least a few subadult birds, easily detected by the pale-banded tail and distinguishable in flight from the adult's jet black tail. Unfortunately, the bright sunlight and the number of fast-moving birds in the group of 65 seen at Thebes on 24 May 2003, kept us from noting exactly how many birds might have been subadults, but in the flock of 52 on 9 May 2003 at that location, we saw a minimum of five subadults in that group.

Immature birds apparently often arrive somewhat later than adults and depart about a month earlier at their southern Illinois breeding sites (Evans 1981). Further, most subadults departed there as the young from adult pairs were fledging and food supplies became critical, which could explain the appearance of subadults in non-breeding areas farther north in Illinois in June and July. This would be especially true in years when food supplies are low on the breeding grounds or when superabundant, easily procured sources of food (e.g. periodic cicada outbreaks) appear elsewhere. Interestingly, many vagrant birds both outside of their normal range in Illinois and elsewhere are subadult birds including the only Mississippi Kite that I have seen in central Illinois, at the Middlefork State Fish and Wildlife Area in Vermilion County on 27 May 1991, as well as the aforementioned Kennekuk County Park birds. Periodic cicada outbreaks tend to peak in May (pers. obs.), and would provide a bounteous food supply for young kites not attached to a nest, and birds that are forced to leave later in the nesting cycle would explain vagrant, subadult kite records north of their Illinois breeding range, such as the subadult bird at Springfield on 4-9 June 1998 (Kleen 1999). These subadult birds have frequently been documented as helping pairs of

other adult kites at their nests. Adults are apparently paired upon their arrival at their southern Illinois breeding locations and in other areas of their range (Evans 1981). Nest building typically occurred between 9 May-4 June (Evans 1981). One or two subadults often associated with each nesting pair of adults and shared in nest defense (Evans 1981). Subadults have occasionally been known to breed successfully with adults as well (Parker 1974).

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