

White-Tailed Kite in Urbana

After a long, dreary, and slow-to-arrive spring migration, 8 May 1997 finally held the promise of being a good day. The sky had been relatively clear the night before and a warm front was moving in. Sure enough, when I awoke, I could already hear new arrivals in the trees outside my house. Although I could not get any time off work, I did have the foresight to throw a pair of binoculars into my backpack and leave early to walk to work, arranging my itinerary to include a small park and other areas where landbird migrants congregated. As expected, there were lots of birds around. Even the main quadrangle of the University of Illinois (Champaign County) was loaded with birds.

On my walk home, I continued to observe birds everywhere. At one point, I occupied myself by trying to census orioles and grosbeaks that seemed to be in every tree, and were even making themselves known to the non-birders in the neighborhood.

While watching a Magnolia Warbler that landed in a tree in front of me, I noticed a large shadow passing on the ground. I immediately looked up to see what appeared to be a large whitish bird. "A gull?" I thought. No! It was short-billed, too slender, and long-tailed. Plus, its flight was buoyant and graceful.

"Kite-like," I thought, as my heart began racing.

I quickly raised my binoculars. Despite my initial impression of whiteness, I was expecting the bird to turn out to be the very rare, but plausible, Mississippi Kite,

which has been seen in east-central Illinois in nearby Vermilion, Piatt, and McLean Counties. But my initial impression of the bird's whiteness was correct. The bird, which was gliding low overhead had an all-white tail and underparts, with white wing-linings, dusky primaries, and conspicuous black carpal patches, all of which identified it as an adult White-tailed Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*).

I watched the bird as it gracefully sailed north, then ran after it as it receded into the distance, where I lost sight of it behind the trees.

The White-tailed Kite nests in lowlands, grasslands, and open areas in California (Price et al. 1995), Washington State, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as coastally in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and south central Florida. Though the bird seemed destined to extinction in the 1930s due to habitat destruction, it has recently been expanding its range and numbers due to new agriculture practices that created habitat for this species. The White-tailed Kite has been seen recently in Knox and Sangamon Counties, Illinois.

Literature Cited

Price, J., S. Droegge, and A. Price. 1995. The Summer Atlas of North American Birds. Academic Press. San Diego, CA.

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Early Stilt in Northern Illinois

On 21 March 1997, the only bird species on my mind was the Sandhill Crane. My youngest granddaughter, Emily, was celebrating her 7th birthday the next day. I'm the official family whatever-you-want-on-your-birthday-cake-I'll-try maker. Emily wanted a Sandhill Crane in a pond, so that's what I was trying to make. She had originally wanted Mickey Mouse, but when she got off the school bus on 5 March 1997, at least 1,000 Sandhill Cranes flew over our house. Mickey was out. The crane was in.

The phone rang while I was frosting the cake about 2:30 p.m., 21 March. It was Roger Ainsworth, one of the calmest laid-back birders I know. Detecting a rare level of excitement in his voice, I knew it was worth putting the cake on hold. He told me he had just driven past Garden Prairie Slough in Boone County on his way home from work and spotted a Black-necked Stilt. He walked his dog, gathered his camera equipment, and beat it back to

the slough. He also called me. Bless him. I grabbed both Emmy's and my binoculars, got the car, and waited the next few minutes at the top of the driveway for her school bus to arrive.

By 3:15, we were off to the slough, and sure enough, just where Roger had said it would be, stood the stilt. For the most part, the east side of slough is rich loam farmland that in early spring holds copious amounts of sheet water enjoyed by many migrating waterfowl. On this day, one of the few sunny balmy days we are privy to in northern Illinois in March, conditions were perfect. There was no wind, and the sun had moved enough to the west to be almost behind us. All we had to do was pull off the road, roll down the windows, and enjoy.

The only other birds present were many Killdeer. We easily heard the stilt's vocalization, and very vocal it was. Emmy compared his sound to a small puppy.