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The Status and Preservation of the White-tailed Kite in California

The National Association of Audubon Societies suggested, in October, 1938, that an attempt be made to discover something about the status of the White-tailed Kite in California with a view to possible protective measures. I undertook to make a beginning for such a study, and on May 4, 1940, submitted to the National Association a report of 44 typed pages which included a survey of the situation up to January 1, 1940. I did not mean to imply by this report that conclusive facts were presented or that the way is clear for Kite preservation. Rather, it is to be considered as a sort of outline for a badly needed thorough investigation of the matter.

In the February, 1939, issue of *THE GULL*, a notice of this project was printed with a request that any sort of a record of Kites that readers might have be forwarded to me. I strongly suggested that no definite data as to nesting localities be broadcast and I tried to make it clear that all such information given to me would be held as confidential and that "if there should be any sort of release of material gathered, it would be couched in such general terms that no identification of locality could be made." It was necessary to make this admonition and promise because of the continued existence of illegal traffic in Kite eggs. The co-operation of correspondents has been most gratifying. Their letters, together with many interviews with persons in authority and with those who have had experience with the species, yielded 136 records (occurrence and breeding). These, added to material gleaned from 109 titles found in the literature, have formed the basis for the report. In it I have refrained from mentioning names of correspondents so that there could be no possibility of linking a name with a definite locality. It was not deemed necessary to be cautious in quoting from already-published records.

For the benefit of members of the Audubon Association of the Pacific I submit the following brief arrangement of the report:

Status. Space allows but the briefest treatment here. Suffice it to say that the earliest record for Kites found in the literature was that of Gambel who took three specimens sometime prior to 1846 in the vicinity of the Mission San Juan Bautista. Other early mentions are those of Heermann and Belding. The former wrote in 1859 (*Pac. R. R. Rep.*, X, p. 33) that "the extensive marshes of Suisun, Napa, and Sacramento Valleys are the favorite resort of these birds, more especially during the winter season, as they find a plentiful supply of insects and mice, their principal nourishment. They generally range over their feeding grounds in small flocks, from a single pair up to six or seven pairs together. . . ." Belding, during his collecting experience near Stockton in 1877-78 (*Proc. U. S. Nat'l Mus.*, I, 1879, p. 435), saw as many as twenty at the same moment within a circle of half a mile.

The most northern record of occurrence is at Burney Falls, Shasta County, two seen on April 29, 1937 (as published by Ingles, *Condor*, XXXIX, p. 222). It has

also been recorded by Clay (Condor, XXVIII, p. 98) at Miranda, on the South Fork of the Eel River, on August 6, 1924. (There is no indication that the bird occurs regularly at either of these localities, however.) The most southern record is for Tia Juana Marsh, San Diego County (Huey, Auk, XLVIII, p. 620). There is a single record as far inland as Yosemite National Park (Grinnell, "Animal Life in the Yosemite," p. 281).

There appear to be various areas where records for the species are more numerous. These are the Russian River Valley, the San Francisco Bay area, the Suisun Marshes and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta area, Santa Clara County, southern Santa Cruz and northern Monterey Counties, parts of Santa Barbara County, and the Santa Clara River Valley of Ventura County. Although the south arm of San Francisco Bay and Santa Clara County has had at times a rather heavy population (as Kites go), the most important area probably is the Suisun Marshes and Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region. This might even be considered the center of distribution for the species on the Pacific Coast. In 1936 nine nesting pairs were definitely discovered in an area of ten square miles in the Suisun Marshes and 25 to 30 pairs estimated for the entire marsh area. In the spring of 1940, ten nesting pairs were discovered along 5.8 miles of an island-filled slough in the Stockton district (although this last item exceeds the time limit of the report, it is of such interest that it could not be excluded).

Santa Clara County has had as many as eight to ten pairs in one season (1928). However, since that time there does not appear to have been more than about two pairs known to be nesting at different points in the county.

An old resident of northern Monterey County says that Kites have fluctuated in numbers since his first experience with them there in 1896, decreasing for ten or fifteen years, then increasing, and that they are now on a decline again. Ventura County has had a Kite history since 1880.

More work must be done on the subject before we can arrive at even an approximate conclusion as to the actual numbers of White-tailed Kites in California at present and be able to compare them with those of the past. However, I have tried to ascertain some sort of minimum figure by making a compilation based on breeding records. These were divided into two classifications, *definite* and *probable*. Those records concerning nests in use, *i.e.*, being built, or with eggs or young, were put in the first group; while those referring to pairs that were habitually seen at one place during the breeding season were included in the second. Records for pairs seen often at one place but not in the breeding season, or seen only once, were excluded. There is a total of 93 definite and 50 probable breeding records for the state from 1878 (the year of the first record) up to and including 1939 (records for pairs breeding for consecutive years at one place are considered as one record). As there is no one year in which all the important Kite regions are mentioned, it is difficult to select a year which might indicate a population total at any one time. Because the period 1935-39 contained records in all the regions, these records were selected as a sort of indicator of the present population. This five-year period yielded a total of 32 definite and 39 probable breeding pairs. That this figure represents about one-third of the total records going back for 61 years is not to be taken as an indication of increase. In recent years there has, of course, been a great increase in observers which might account for the comparatively larger figure.

Possibly the Kite never has been an abundant, or even very common species in the state. It is probably true that it never has "within historical times . . . predominated as such raptorial birds as the Desert Sparrow Hawk or the Red-tailed Hawk for instance" (Pickwell, Condor, XXXII, p. 239). No statement as to its actual increase or decrease is justified at the present; nor could we say whether the bird is holding its own.

Certain Characteristics of Kite Behavior. The Kite nests in two rather distinct types of habitat, the willow and marsh or river-bottom type, and the level or slightly rolling or foothill country, where live oaks grow. There seem to be

more records of general occurrence for the former type of country. They have a habit of sometimes nesting rather close together. Pickwell (Condor, *op. cit.*) found three nests within 320 yards of each other. Also ten pairs were found within 5.8 miles in the Stockton region (referred to above). Hatching a second brood after fledging the first has been observed by Hawbecker (Condor, XLII, p. 106) in southern Santa Cruz County. I had previously suspected, but never was able to prove, this sort of behavior in Monterey County. Such close proximity of nests and the hatching of two broods in a season would seem to be rather unusual behavior for a raptorial bird.

Another feature of behavior which is of great importance when we try to record the Kite's numbers, or its increase or decline, is the sudden appearance at a particular place of several nesting pairs, their nesting there for several years, and then their equally abrupt cessation as a breeder in that area. This sort of thing has been recorded in Santa Barbara County, Santa Clara County, and southern Santa Cruz County.

Food. The feeding habits of the Kite are entirely in its favor. All the definitely substantiated records (stomach and pellet analyses) have shown the bird to be a small mammal eater with the meadow mouse (*Microtus*) forming about 90% of its diet. Obviously, every effort should be made to protect it for this reason if for none other.

Preservation of the Kite. Allow me to quote from two articles by Jean M. Linsdale, of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (Condor, XXXII, p. 105, and XXXIX, p. 198) on conservation of certain California birds. He says that the evidence indicates that the Kite (and the Prairie Falcon, Duck Hawk, Red-bellied Hawk, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle and Osprey) is "not in immediate danger of extinction in California but that the prospects are not good for [its] holding out unless our present attitude toward [it] is changed." Most people believe that a "hawk's a hawk" and should be shot and Dr. Linsdale believes that these birds "appear particularly likely to suffer in California because their habitats are restricted in extent and consequently their numbers are always small. Any program to protect these species should involve an effort to preserve as much as possible of the habitats now occupied." He also says that an important danger to these species is the "competitive zeal of egg collectors." He here makes the distinction between the scientific oölogist and the collector who is interested particularly in "exchange value". The former does no permanent harm, but "half a dozen expert collectors of eggs for exchange are able to affect harmfully the welfare of important bird species."

There is no doubt that there is a considerable demand for Kite eggs among this latter type of collector. And even though Kites have been protected by law in California since 1905, when it became illegal to take the bird or its eggs even for scientific purposes, Kites still are occasionally shot and, I am reliably told, there is still traffic in sets of eggs. The price is sufficiently high to make the risk worthwhile.

Other adverse factors are: (1) The indications are that the breeding stock at present is small. If there is now a decline any increase in its rate, or any sharp decline setting in in the near future, might be fatal to the species. (One authority, having read the full report, commented, "The total number of pairs observed, namely during the years 1935 to 1939, even when additional unobserved ones are included, does not indicate a great probability of survival for the Kite.") (2) The Kite is extremely conspicuous and easily shot. Its white plumage is readily noted against the dark green foliage of oaks or willows. It hovers in a stationary position at a low altitude. It often seems unaware of the nearby presence of human beings. It inhabits areas such as duck-hunting marshes, where men are armed and, according to some writers, are ready to shoot them when game is scarce (cf. Grinnell, Condor, XVI, p. 41). However, one ornithologist correspondent who is thoroughly familiar with certain duck-kite areas, says that "rarely, a Kite is shot by a duck hunter"). There are four definite cases in the

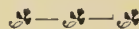
literature of a bird being shot in recent times (Huey, Auk, XLVIII, p. 620; Stoner, Condor, XXXV, p. 121, and XLI, p. 120; Neff, Condor, XXXVI, p. 218). Two other actual shootings in addition to those in the literature are known to me. There are also museum specimens which had been shot "by mistake," and by small boys, etc. (four specimens in C.A.S.). (3) Because of their rarity, Kite eggs are decidedly a "collector's item" and the bird is therefore menaced by unscrupulous commercial collectors. (4) Because of the sometimes erratic movements of the Kite it may be difficult to foresee an exterminating decline, if and when it does set in. (5) Their marsh habitat is becoming more and more restricted, being drained for more intense cultivation, or otherwise affected.

Favorable factors are: (1) It is not restricted to any one area in the state, as is the Condor at the present time, and the Kite seems capable of moving about to a certain extent at least. (2) To the best of our scientific knowledge it is utterly harmless and even beneficial. (3) Above all it is attractive in appearance and would be capable of a wide popular appeal, if properly understood by the general public.

Suggestions for conservation measures have been numerous and space does not permit a discussion of them here (the report contained five pages on this aspect of the matter). I am very grateful for the suggestions submitted to me. They have all been transmitted to the National Association.

In concluding this resume I should like to take the opportunity to thank Dr. John T. Emlen, Jr., for his help on this project and Miss Margaret W. Wythe, of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, for her kind help in arranging the material from the literature. Also, my thanks are due to the California Academy of Sciences and the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology for allowing me to use data from the labels of specimens as well as giving me access to their libraries. Most of all, I want to thank those correspondents, Audubon members as well as others, who so kindly sent me their Kite records.

Laidlaw Williams, Carmel, California. July 13, 1940.



Audubon Notes

August Meeting: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday evening, the 8th, in the Ferry Building.

The evening will be devoted to vacation experiences by members. Please come prepared to help out.

August Field Trip will be taken on Sunday, the 11th, to Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Take car No. 5 and meet at Fulton and Stanyan Streets at 10:00 a. m. Bring luncheon.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

Organized January 25, 1917

For the Study and the Protection of Birds

President.....Mr. B. K. Dunshee....Room 714, 245 Market St., San Francisco
 Corresponding Secretary.....Mr. Joseph J. Webb.....519 California St., San Francisco
 Treasurer.....Mrs. A. B. Stephens.....1695 Filbert St., San Francisco

Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 P. M., Ferry Building.

Address Bulletin correspondence to Mrs. A. B. Stephens, Editor, 1695 Filbert St., San Francisco.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

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Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.