

SWALLOW-TAILED KITE

Elanoides forficatus

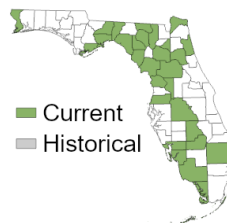
Order: Accipitriformes

Family: Accipitridae

FNAI Ranks: G5/S2

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: none



Description: An incredibly graceful, slim, black and white raptor with long pointed wings and strongly forked tail. White head, breast, belly, and underwing coverts contrast strikingly with black flight feathers, back, and tail. Young of year have shorter tail than adults. Truly aerial acrobats as they fly low over treetops in search of flying insects or small arboreal vertebrates.

Similar Species: Not likely to be confused with other species. The deeply forked black tail and contrasting black and white plumage are distinctive.

Habitat: Nesting and foraging habitats include pine forests and savannas, cypress and cypress-hardwood swamps, hardwood hammocks, mangrove swamps, narrow riparian forests, prairies, and freshwater and brackish marshes. Kites require a mosaic of communities, with tall, accessible trees for nesting and open areas for foraging.

Seasonal Occurrence: Migratory. Breeds in southeastern U.S. and winters in South America. Birds arrive in Florida in late February - early March and fall migrants leave from late July - early September. Large numbers of kites may gather in pre-migratory roosts.

Florida Distribution: Widespread but spotty distribution, with no recent records for 18 of 67 counties; low density and highly clumped distribution of birds, along with low observer-density, may explain gaps in some areas (Meyer and Collopy 1990).

Range-wide Distribution: Occurs locally from South Carolina south to Florida; west to Louisiana and east Texas; and from southeastern Mexico south through Central America to northern Argentina, Paraguay, and southern Brazil. U.S. birds winter in South America.

Conservation Status: U.S. breeding range is greatly reduced from an estimated 21 states (early 1900s) to portions of seven southeastern states today. U.S. population estimated at about 3,200 - 4,600 individuals including non-breeding adults and young of the year; 60 - 65 percent of population occurs in Florida. Habitat alteration and loss because of urban development

and conversion to large-scale agriculture (e.g., citrus; short-rotation, even-aged forestry practices) pose major threats. Majority of nesting kites occur in central and southwestern regions of Florida on private lands, where conversion of land is occurring at a rapid rate. Protected lands with kites include Big Cypress National Preserve, Fakahatchee Strand, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Everglades National Park, Big Bend Wildlife Management Area (WMA), and Apalachicola National Forest. Fisheating Creek WMA and Fisheating Creek Conservation Easement are important recent (2000) acquisitions. Not currently listed by federal or state agencies.

Protection and Management: Preserve large tracts of heterogeneous habitat to ensure population recovery. Identification of privately owned nesting and roosting sites is important; develop incentives such as tax breaks, conservation easements, cooperative agreements with landowners to maintain existing land uses. Work with agricultural interests to maintain critical habitat for nesting and roosting, as well as water quality and periodicity (Meyer and Collopy 1990). Manage for tall nesting trees (preferably pine or cypress) that emerge from the surrounding canopy in pine plantations. Fire management is necessary to maintain habitat heterogeneity.

References: Poole and Gill (eds.) 1995, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Stevenson and Anderson 1994.



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