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THE STATUS OF THE WHITE-TAILED KITE IN FLORIDA

Herbert W. Kale, II

Recent population increase and range expansion in North and Middle America by the White-tailed Kite, *Elanus caeruleus majusculus*,¹ Particularly since the early 1960's (Eisenmann, 1971; Thurber and Serrana, 1972), suggest that observers in Florida should be especially alert for the presence of this species. Indeed since 1961 sightings in Florida have increased considerably over the previous few decades.

Recent population increase and range expansion in North and Middle America by the White-tailed Kite, *Elanus caeruleus leucurus*,¹ particularly since the early 1960's (Eisenmann, 1971; Thurber and Serrana, 1972), suggest that observers in Florida should be especially alert for the presence of this species. Indeed since 1961 sightings in Florida have increased considerably over the previous few decades.

The Florida status of this "rare and local resident" was summarized in 1932 by Howell (1932: 163-164), updated in 1953 by Sprunt (1954: 93-94), and included a total of 8 records prior to 1900 and 12 records between 1900 and 1954. Nine of these refer to collected specimens, with the most recent specimen taken in 1920. The last known nesting in Florida, represented by a nest without eggs, was seen on 4 February 1910 by D.J. Nicholson on the Kissimmee Prairie (Sprunt, 1954). Only 2 additional observations were reported in the 8 years following Sprunt's publication - one by S.G. Ianovic at Indian Prairie Canal on State Road (S.R.) 78 near Lake Okeechobee, Glades County, on 4 January 1954, and one near Hialeah, Dade County, on 14 January 1954 by J.D. Thompson (Sprunt, 1963).

Eleven observations of White-tailed Kites have been reported in Florida since 1961. One was seen at Panther Point Sanctuary (Polk County) on 14 March and 25 May 1961, and 28 October 1962 by the Heinzmans (1963). Jennings (1963) sighted an adult near his ranch on Rye Road W of Bradenton, Manatee County, on 27 February 1963. Norman Jaeger photographed a bird at close range in the St. Johns Marsh, 2 miles SW of Melbourne in December 1963 (*vide* A.D. Cruickshank). Brigham and Foster (1964) observed an adult hovering over a wet meadow beside S.R. 721 and S.R. 70 near Brighton, Highlands County, on 19 February 1964. Edscorn (*in litt.*) described in detail an adult kite observed closely as it flew northward across

¹ I have followed the nomenclature proposed by K.C. Parkes (1958). Specific relationships in the genus *Elanus*. (*Condor* 60: 139-140) rather than that (*Elanus leucurus*) of the 5th edition of the A.O.U. Checklist.

the Tamiami Trail 2 miles W. of Carnestown, Collier County, on 1 May 1966. The bird was watched until it passed out of view still flying to the north. On 19 October 1966, a kite was seen by Hendrickson *et al.* (1967) along U. S. 441, just south of Fort Drum, Okeechobee County. Dodd (in litt.) observed an adult flying over a wet meadow several miles north of Myakka, Sarasota County, near the junction of S.R. 70 and 780 on 14 November 1970. Kale (Robertson, 1972) reported an immature kite at Vero Beach, Indian River County, on 9 September 1971, and McGowan (Ogden, 1972) observed an adult kite perched alongside I-75 near Lake City, Columbia County, on 1 August 1972. This bird was so tame it refused to fly even when rocks were thrown at it (McGowan, in litt.) and is the most northerly record for the state. Figure 1 shows locations of all White-tailed Kite observations in Florida since 1872.

The kite near Vero Beach (mentioned above) appears to be the only observation of an immature bird, hence details of this occurrence are presented here. While driving home on the afternoon of 9 September 1971 about 3 miles south of Vero Beach, I noticed a gull-like bird slowly flying southward at approximately 300-500 feet elevation and heading toward my house. I reached home shortly before the bird arrived overhead and with 7-12x50 zoom binoculars was able to observe it for several minutes. When it reached a point directly overhead it began circling slowly, gradually moving southward. At this point I recognized it to be a kite, but unlike any I had ever seen. The back, the dorsal surface of the wings, and the breast were brownish, the undersurface of the wings and tail were white - characteristic of the plumage of an immature White-tailed Kite.

Although records of this species have increased from a rate of 0.26 per year through the first half of the century to 0.91 per year since 1961 (1961-1973), the species must still be considered extremely rare. The Florida range appears to be the prairies of the central and west-central peninsula, much of which is now fenced rangeland and inaccessible to the public, except for highways traversing the prairies (Robertson and Ogden, ms.). Part of the increase in observations in the past decade may be the result of more observers afield and greater mobility of observers, but the documented increase of the species in Central America and western United States suggests that we can expect more individuals to appear in Florida in the future. Because they rarely remain for long in any one place, and since no breeding has been reported in Florida for over 60 years, I suggest that these birds are not local residents, but more likely accidentals or migrants from the populations in the west or in Central America. Howell (1932) opined that "the species seems to be on the verge of extinction in Florida." Today, the so-called resident population, like the breeding population of the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) in the eastern United States, may indeed be extinct.

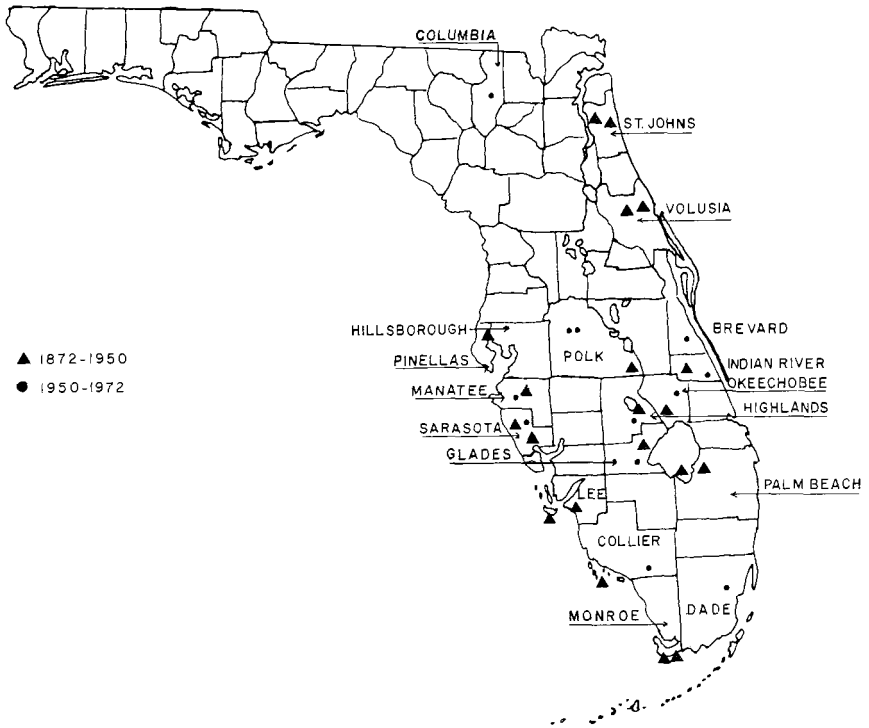


Figure 1. Locations of White-tailed Kite observations in Florida 1872-1972.

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