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THE EVERGLADE KITE

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Two species of snail-eating kites, both of wide distribution in the warmer parts of the New World, find their northern limits in the southern United States. One is the Snail or Everglade Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*), long recognized as a Florida specialty by ornithologists and bird-watchers; the second is the Hook-billed Kite (*Chondrohierax uncinatus*), a recent arrival in southernmost Texas. The Snail Kite specializes on large fresh-water snails; the Hook-billed uses its coarser beak to extract flesh from land snails.

Although the Snail Kite is common or even abundant in parts of its range—Don Eckelberry and I once counted over 200 in sight at one time in a vast marsh in Argentina—the Florida population has long suffered from human onslaughts upon the wetlands of that state and is currently on the endangered species roster. Probably completely isolated from other segments of the species and in many ways our most specialized raptor, it deserves such status. Further, the Snail Kite prospers as Florida's wetlands prosper and serves as an indicator species in a state where the vast demands of the Miami strip and other areas are threatening what once seemed to be the best watered section of eastern United States.

A glaucous or leaden bloom sets off the black plumage of the male Snail Kite (Fig. 1, 2). Robert Ridgway thought this is more pronounced in the Florida population and a century ago gave it the subspecific name *plumbeus*. Dr. Herbert Friedmann, Ridgway's successor as curator of birds at the Smithsonian, noticed that this bloom disappears from the plumage in time, or even during the process of preparing a specimen. He concluded that this kite shows no geographical variation in color throughout its vast range. Accepting this conclusion, there remain only rather trivial variations

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Fig. 1. Male Snail Kite. Photography courtesy of Paul W. Sykes, Jr., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

in size. South American Snail Kites are a little smaller and represent *Rostrhamus sociabilis sociabilis*. Those of Florida are larger and the name *plumbeus* may be retained for them. Finally the population of eastern Mexico—Veracruz and thereabouts—have unusually large bills. In the preliminary studies for their proposed “Birds of Mexico” (which never saw the light of day) Nelson and Goldman noticed this and named them *R. s. major*. Perhaps the snails upon which they feed are larger in that area?



Fig. 2. Female Snail Kite. Photograph courtesy of Paul W. Sykes, Jr., U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dr. Friedmann in the mentioned review, which he did while writing the volume on Falconiformes for the continuation of Ridgway's "Birds of North and Middle America", noticed slight differences in size and proportions in the Snail Kites of Cuba and the Isle of Pines and named them *R. s. levis*. Although few specimens from Cuba are available anywhere, I later decided that by present standards the Cuban birds are not separable from those of Florida and that the name *plumbeus* should apply to both. But, to repeat, this should not

affect the status of the Florida kites as endangered; all appropriate measures should be taken to insure their survival.

The wording of the Endangered Species Act recognizes that policy should not be dictated by sometimes varying opinions as to the taxonomic status of an organism; opinions which may extend even to the species level—for example is the Florida Scrub Jay a race of the western one or a species? Populations may be designated as endangered regardless of their taxonomic rank.

This policy must be implemented carefully and has already engendered some opposition. The commonest of birds may be endangered locally if the environment is being altered; sometimes the alteration may be natural such as the progression from brush to woodland following a lightning-caused fire. Nor should the subspecies criterion be pushed too far. We heard much about the "Southern" Bald Eagle being endangered, but it differs from the "Northern" Bald Eagle only in averaging slightly smaller and since the southern eagles, or some of them, wander north in summer and the northern ones south in winter, the situation is further confused. But as with the Snail Kite this does not mean that the eagle should be denied protection and management in the very extensive portions of its range where it has been nearly or quite extirpated as a breeding bird.

Nor can one avoid purely subjective considerations. We are more interested in saving the Whooping Crane or Bachman's Warbler than the virus of smallpox, though a case has been made even for the last. Given the world's political fragmentation, each country has to look first to its own wildlife heritage; the Everglade Kite, to revert for a moment to its old name, is certainly a remarkable, indeed unique element in that of the United States; may it always remain so.