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An Observed Incident of Rat Snake Predation on Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) Chicks in Florida

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Figure 1. Ring-billed Gull with an abnormally long bill photographed at Cedar Key, Florida in May 1983.

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An observed incident of rat snake predation on Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) chicks in Florida.—Predation is one of the major causes of nest failure in Snail Kites (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) (Beissinger 1986, *Ecology* 67: 1445-1459; Sykes 1987, *J. Field Ornithol.* 58: 171-189). The identity of nest predators, however, often is difficult to determine because the evidence (e.g. broken shells, missing young) left at nests may be inconclusive. Beissinger (1986) and Sykes (1987) reported that rat snakes (*Elaphe obsoleta*) were responsible for much of the nest losses of Snail Kites during their studies but provided no empirical evidence to support these suspicions. In this paper we describe the first observed incident of a rat snake preying upon a brood of Snail Kites.

On 22 March 1987, at about 1730 hr, we were conducting routine nest inspections in State Water Conservation Area 3A (Dade Co.), 25 km west of Miami, as part of an ongoing study of the influence of water level on nesting success of Snail Kites. Nest no. 232 was situated 30 m north of the L-29 canal, which runs parallel to U. S. Highway 41, and 3 km east of the Shark Valley entrance road to Everglades National Park. The nest was 4.5 m high in a southern willow (*Salix caroliniana*) and required a mirror pole to observe its contents.

The nest contained a rat snake and one live kite chick estimated to be 2-4 days old. On our previous visit 13 days earlier the nest had contained 2 eggs. The snake did not appear to be inhibited by our presence as it immediately proceeded to grasp the young kite by the neck, work its mouth over the nestling's head, and swallow it. Less than 3 minutes elapsed from the time that the snake grasped the nestling until the snake had completely consumed it.

We collected the snake for dissection in an attempt to account for the second young or egg. The snake measured 1.73 m in length. Upon dissection we found a second young kite presumably from the same nest (Fig. 1) and the largely digested remains of an unidentified small mammal.

Both adult kites circled overhead during the consumption of the second chick. Our presence probably prevented them from trying to defend their nest; however, because our approach by airboat was rapid, it is likely that the first young had been consumed by the snake prior to our arrival. This suggests that Snail Kite parents may not be effective in defending their nest from snake predators.

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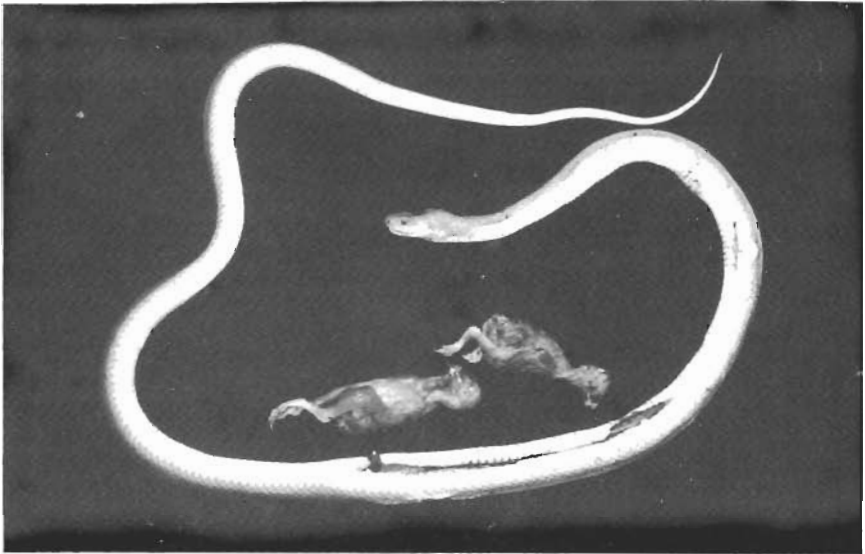


Figure 1. Dissected rat snake collected at a Snail Kite nest, showing the remains of two nestlings it consumed.

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FLORIDA BIRDS IN THE PERIODICAL LITERATURE

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This list contains 86 citations to recent (1985-1986) articles about Florida birds except those published in *Florida Field Naturalist* and the seasonal reports in *American Birds*. Authors are encouraged to send reprints of their articles to the compiler for inclusion in this annual feature.

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