

Chondrohierax uncinatus (Hook-billed Kite)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Hook-billed kite, *Chondrohierax uncinatus*.

[http://www.icesi.edu.co/wiki_aves_colombia/tiki-index.php?page=Caracolero+selv%C3%A1tico, downloaded 24 January 2017]

TRAITS. Hook-billed kites are usually around 39-51cm in length with wingspans of 79-98cm. Their named name is derived from their iconic hooked bill (Fig. 1). These birds are sexually dimorphic in their feather coloration. Males are usually slate grey, with dark grey chins and throats, and the undersides (breast and belly) are often grey as well with white barring. They have black tails with two whitish grey bands and thin white tips (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017). Females are generally dark brown with a rufous (reddish brown) collar (Fig. 1). Their undersides are also rufous, with white barring (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017). Males and females share several facial features including pale irises, pale greenish-yellow lower mandibles, lores (the skin between the eye and nostril) and eye rings. They also have an orange patch of skin located near the lores. Hook-billed kites have short yellow legs, a feature that is uncommon in raptors (Clark and Schmitt, 2017).

DISTRIBUTION. *C. uncinatus* can be found in many countries through Central and South America as well as the Caribbean (Fig. 2), from Texas in the United States, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guyana (IUCN, 2017). In Trinidad, it is considered an infrequent visitor with reported sightings in areas such as Penal, Debe and Guayaguayare (Global raptor network, 2017).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Areas of low or middle elevation are often home to these birds. They are tolerant of disturbed areas and can often be found nesting in wooded areas, swamps, marshes, forested areas and to a lesser extent scrubland (Restall, 2007; Global raptor network, 2017). Hook-billed kites make use of the daylight hour and rest at night as such they are said to be diurnal. They are considered rather sluggish and frequently occupy perches when not in flight (Restall, 2007).

FOOD AND FEEDING. These birds are known for nesting in areas where their favourite food is abundant; tree snails (Fig. 3). This diet is often supplemented other small creatures such as frogs, insects, lizards, and salamanders (Terres, 1982). Their curved bill is utilized in extracting the soft body of a snail from its shell. As many other raptors, hook-billed kites often glide down from a perched position to seize their prey in their talons. These talons are used for gripping the prey while they use their beaks to feed (Smith and Temple, 1982). In some cases, they may also hop branch to branch foraging for food (Restall, 2007).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. These birds are often found alone, however in some cases they may be found in pairs or even in groups of three to four individuals. It was observed in one area that there were six nests which were found in close proximity to each other, which led to the conclusion that there was a moderate social dispersion on the species. It is not uncommon that multiple birds may nest in the same area due to food abundance (Oiseaux-Birds, 2017) These birds have also shown group migration patterns of 20-30 birds flying together (Ferguson-Lee and Christie, 2001). The global population is estimated to be 200,000 mature individuals (IUCN, 2017).

REPRODUCTION. Hook-billed kites are seasonal breeders and usually breed during the rainy season when their main food source the tree snail is available. Both parents do nest construction, using small twigs to construct a somewhat flimsy, shallow nest about 25-50cm in diameter. The females lay about two eggs on average, these eggs are usually white with brown markings. Incubation usually takes on average 35 days. Both parents help in the incubation and postnatal care once the chick is born (Global raptor network, 2017).

BEHAVIOUR. Chicks often begin fledging within 29-39 days. In this life stage the young bird's feathers have grown in and they begin to learn how to fly. Parents often stay with the chicks to prevent predation, usually through calls or soaring overhead (Smith, 1982). Hook-billed kites often communicate via a "wi wi wi wi-uh" cry (Restall, 2007).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. Notwithstanding a declining population trend, hook-billed kites are listed as of Least Concern by the IUCN. They have few natural predators and most of their problems can be attributed to man, with deforestation often being the main cause (Global raptor network, 2017).

REFERENCES

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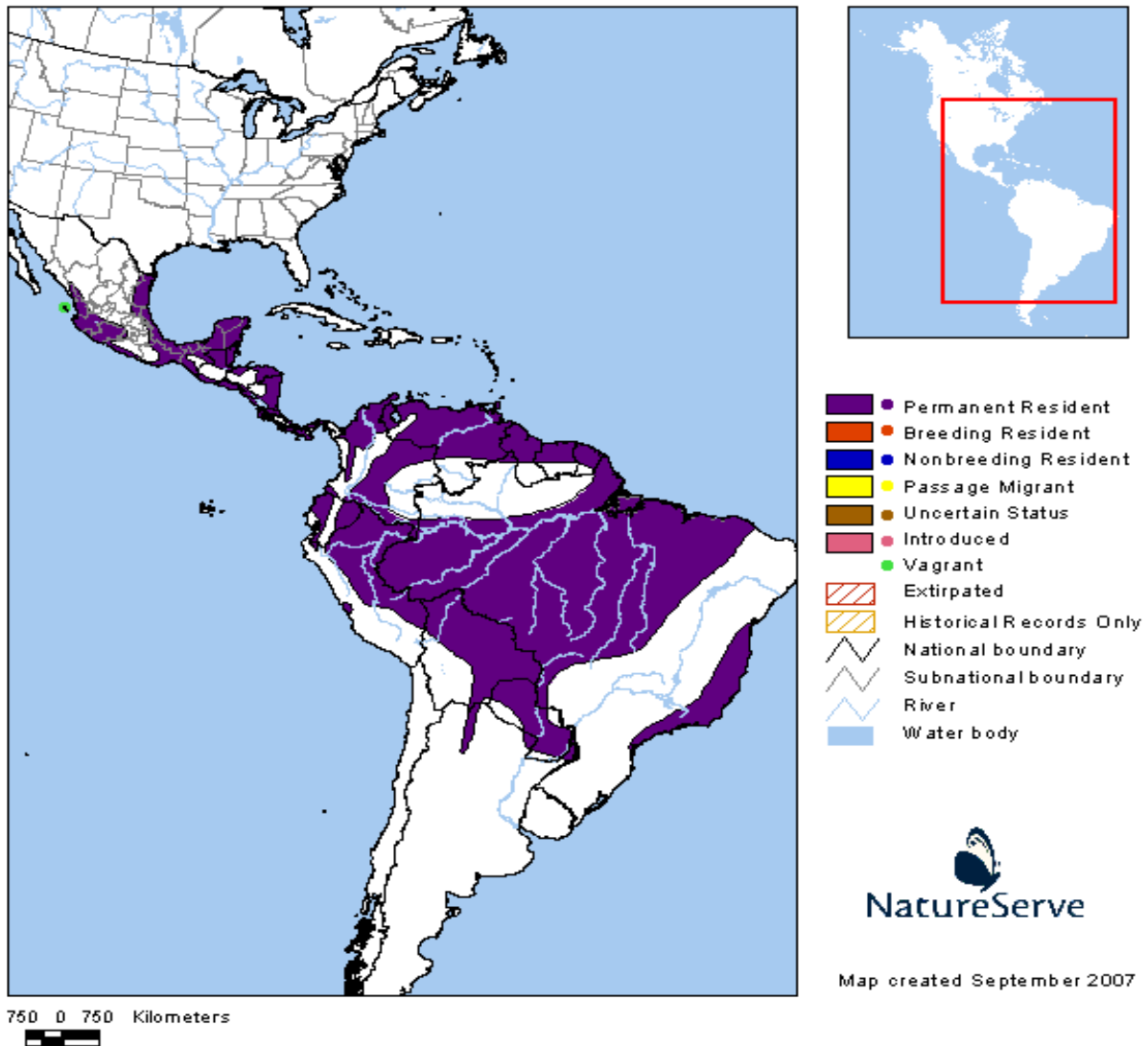


Fig. 2. Geographical range of hook-billed kite.

[http://www.birdphotos.com/photos/v?q=gallery&g2_view=xebug.ShowTree&g2_code=RangeMap&g2_species=Hook-billed%20Kite, downloaded 13 February 2017]



Fig. 3. Hook-billed kite feeding on snail.

[http://www.mae-da-lua.org/photos/chondrohierax_uncinatus_03.jpg, downloaded 13 February 2017]

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