

## *Elanoides forficatus* (Swallow-tailed Kite)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** Swallow-tailed kite, *Elanoides forficatus*.

[<http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/swallow-tailed-kite>, downloaded 2 March 2017]

**TRAITS.** *Elanoides forficatus*, commonly known as the swallow-tailed kite, is a raptor with long, pointed wings and a forked tail (Fig. 1). It boasts a wingspan of approximately 1.2m and has a forked tail approximately 32cm long. The back/dorsal area of *Elanoides forficatus* is black as opposed to the white colour that can be observed on its head and underparts. *Elanoides forficatus* adults weigh about 440-480g, with females slightly heavier than the males (Meyer, 1995).

**DISTRIBUTION.** *Elanoides forficatus* can be found in the forested wetlands and mixed pine habitats of the southeastern United States in the breeding season, including Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina (Meyer et al., 2017). The swallow-tailed kite is also resident year-round in various Caribbean, Central American and South American countries including Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Belize, Mexico and Paraguay (Fig. 2). The swallow-tailed kite is native to Trinidad and Tobago (IUCN, 2017).

**HABITAT AND ACTIVITY.** This species inhabits both temperate and tropical regions. Forests, wooded swamps and marshes from sea level to heights of about 1850m are ideal habitats for the swallow-tailed kite. Some of the main characteristics of the habitats that the swallow-tailed kite dwell in are tall trees, to allow easy access for nesting. Another key feature would be large open areas for foraging. Pines trees are the preferred nesting trees of the swallow-tailed kite (Meyer, 1995). They generally roost in groups of up to 30 individuals during the night during the nesting period and prior to migration (Meyer, 1995; Meyer and Collopy, 1995).

**FOOD AND FEEDING.** Swallow-tailed kites are generally insectivores, that is their diet consists mainly of insects. They have however been known to prey on snakes, frogs, nestling and fledgling birds, bats, fruit, and fish. However, fruit consumption is limited to tropical regions. Swallow-tailed kites tend to search for and gather their food, a process known as foraging, by flying over or under the canopies of trees. They capture and eat their prey mid-flight, they do not hover (Meyer, 1995).

**POPULATION ECOLOGY.** Swallow-tailed kites are noted to be both solitary and/or social in nature. They tend to nest in close proximity to one another during the nesting season and it has also been observed that they form large gatherings prior to migration in some areas (Fig. 3) (Wetmore, 1965).

**REPRODUCTION.** Swallow-tailed kites have a monogamous mating system, but this is not always maintained outside the breeding season. During mating, the male and female usually approach each other on horizontal branches. The male would then land on his mate's back and drape his wings over her (Fig. 4), and this is where mating then occurs (Johnsgard, 1990). Swallow-tailed kites usually have a fixed, very short breeding season, around April. The females typically lay 2 eggs and these go through the incubation process for 28 days on average. The fledgling period of the newly hatched swallow-tailed kites usually ranges from 36-42 days. Both the male and female parents incubate the eggs. The males usually are the ones that bring back food to the nest and the female guards and protects the hatchlings and the nest. Even after the fledging process ends the parents continue to provide food for the young ones (Wetmore, 1965). Juvenile swallow-tailed kites have been known to exhibit siblicide; this is when the older sibling ends up killing the younger hatchling, when the food supply is short (Gerhardt et al., 1997). Fledglings of this species are preyed on by the tiger owl *Bubo virginianus* (Wetmore, 1965).

**BEHAVIOUR.** This species communicates mainly via high-pitched cries and whistles while foraging or in the mating season. They also use visual communication methods such as physical postures that are associated with courting and mating (Wetmore, 1965).

**APPLIED ECOLOGY.** This species is listed as Least Concern (LC) by the IUCN Red List Assessment. This is due to the species having a very wide range and as a result it nowhere near the threshold requirements needed to be considered vulnerable (IUCN, 2017).

## REFERENCES

- Gerhardt, R., Gerhardt, D., and Vasquez, M. (1997). Siblicide in Swallow-Tailed Kites. *The Wilson Bulletin*.
- IUCN. (2017). *Elanoides forficatus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/links/22695017/0>
- Johnsgard, P. (1990). *Hawks, Eagles, and Falcons of North America*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Meyer, K.D. (1995). Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*). In: *The Birds of North America*.

Meyer, K.D., and M.W. Collopy. (1995). Status, distribution and habitat requirements of the American swallow-tailed kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) in Florida.

Meyer, K. D., Miller, K. D. Kubilis, P., Cely, J. E. and Swan, D. (2017). Swallow-tailed Kite Habitat Preferences in the Southeastern U.S.: Compositional Analysis of nest-site selection in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.

Wetmore, A. (1965). Water, Prey, and Game Birds of North America. Chicago: R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co.

Author: Troy Glod

Posted online: 2017



**Fig. 2.** Swallow-tailed kite geographic distribution.

[<http://maps.iucnredlist.org/map.html?id=22695017>, downloaded 2 March 2017]



**Fig. 3.** Swallow tailed kites roosting.

[[http://www.blog.catandturtle.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Swallow-tailed-Kites-Roosting-in-Trees\\_Lake-Woodruff\\_201407261\\_copyrightJessYarnell.jpg](http://www.blog.catandturtle.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Swallow-tailed-Kites-Roosting-in-Trees_Lake-Woodruff_201407261_copyrightJessYarnell.jpg), downloaded 2 March 2017]



**Fig. 4.** Swallow-tailed kites mating.

[<https://www.flickr.com/photos/ruthpphoto/27941134364/>, downloaded 2 March 2017]