

Gampsonyx swainsonii (Pearl Kite)

Family: Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites and Eagles)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Pearl kite, *Gampsonyx swainsonii*.

[<http://www.hbw.com/ibc/photo/pearl-kite-gampsonyx-swainsonii/bird-was-perched-tree>, downloaded 9 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Gampsonyx swainsonii*, commonly called the pearl kite, is a small hawk in the family Accipitridae (Perrins, 2003). Due to similarities between the two groups, it was once thought to be a member of the Falconidae family (Erize et al., 2006), and some literature still refers to it as being a falcon; Restal et al., (2007) refer to it as a falcon hawk. In general, *G. swainsonii* are dark (black/grey) on top and white underneath. Their cheeks and feet are yellow, their eyes are brown (chestnut), they have bills that are black in colour and they display coloured patches on either side of their chests (Blake, 1977) (Fig. 1). Mature pearl kites weigh about 93g and possess wings from 14.5-15.9cm in length (ffrench, 2012). Due to size similarities, pearl kites may mistakenly be identified as American kestrels or vice versa (Restall et al., 2007)

DISTRIBUTION. *Gampsonyx swainsonii* can be found in northern Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Trinidad (Blake, 1977) (Fig. 2). However, the bird is not present throughout the island of Trinidad, and it is not present on the neighbouring island of Tobago (Restal et al., 2007). Places in Trinidad where the bird has been seen include St. Augustine and Arima (ffrench, 2012). In French Guiana only one occurrence of *Gampsonyx swainsonii* is known (Restall et al., 2007).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. The species is drawn to woodlands and forests (Blake, 1977). Other habitats include palm groves, savannas and dry woodlands (Erize et al., 2006). They often fly by themselves, but when this is not the case, they may be seen in pairs. Birds of this species take animals smaller than themselves, such as lizards and other birds (Restall et al., 2007). Nests are constructed by both sexes and may be built as high as 25m in the trees (ffrench, 2012).

FOOD AND FEEDING. When these birds have offspring, it is the responsibility of the males to gather food and return with it to the nest. The diet of the species consists mainly of insects such as cockroaches, smaller birds than itself and lizards (Fig. 3). Although males acquire the food, it is only the female that feeds the nestlings (ffrench, 2012).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Not much is known about the population ecology of *Gampsonyx swainsonii*, except that the population was increasing as of 2016. At that time between 1,000 and 10,000 individuals were estimated to be alive, with two thirds of those being adults (IUCN, 2016). In Colombia the bird had begun to spread to southern areas by 1981 (Alvarez-Lopez and Kattan, 1995).

REPRODUCTION. Usually, the breeding period for the species is between January and May. However, these birds have been known to also breed in the month of October (ffrench, 2012). During the courtship period, males fly close to the females and tend to flutter their wings. The females then follow in pursuit. On the female side, they tend to make longer, softer notes during this time. Both sexes invest in nest building, using many sticks to create them. The females may have between two and four eggs and it is the responsibility of both parents to incubate them until they hatch. This period is approximately 34 days long (ffrench, 2012).

BEHAVIOUR. *Gampsonyx swainsonii* have been known to fly and perch high above the ground, and to catch prey by descending from such heights. It has also been documented that they get in relatively close range to people, unlike some other wild animals (ffrench, 2012).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. As of 2016 *Gampsonyx swainsonii* was labelled as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List. Although sightings may be uncommon in Trinidad as compared to other birds, its expanding population coupled with the large range it occupies means that the species is not a threatened one. The species also seems to be moving into new areas as a result of deforestation (IUCN, 2016). Nevertheless, since deforestation is affecting migration, it should also be looked into as a potential risk factor for the population.

REFERENCES

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Author: Sherries King

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Fig. 2. Distribution of *Gampsonyx swainsonii*.

[<http://maps.iucnredlist.org/map.html?id=22695025>, downloaded 9 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Pearl kite with captured prey (lizard).

[<http://planetbirds.blogspot.com/2014/05/pearl-kite.html>, downloaded 9 March 2017]

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