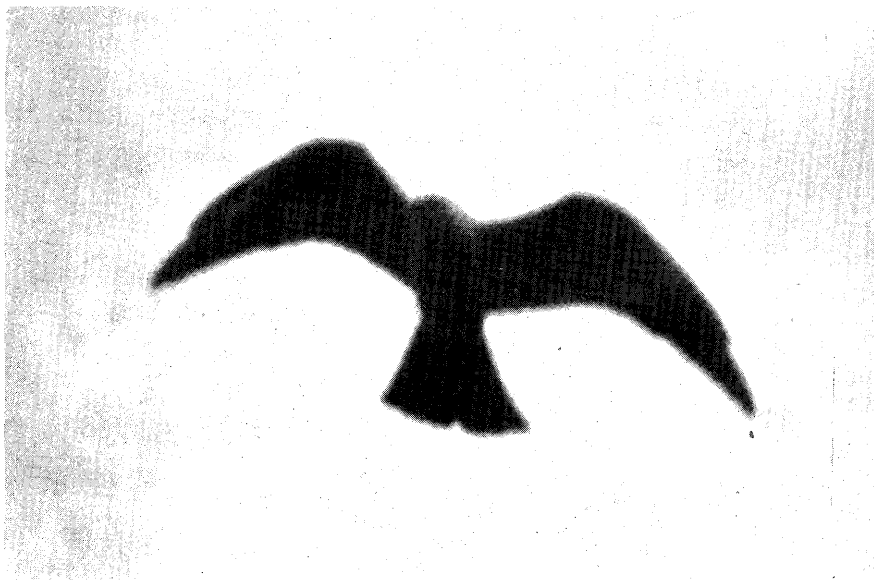




Mississippi Kite
Staten Island *Bernie Paul*

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES

33. MISSISSIPPI KITE

ROBERT CLERMONT

On 28 May 1979, the first Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) ever recorded in New York State was seen at the LaTourette Golf Course, Staten Island (Richmond County) by the writer and Richard ZainEldeen. The following day, a second individual was seen by alerted observers in the area, and the two birds were seen, together and separately, by many qualified observers over a period of ten days. The final sighting reported was on 8 June 1979 about a mile away at Moravian Cemetery, an alternate site visited by the kites during their stay in the area.

When we first spotted the kite, all we saw was a falcon-like bird with peculiar flight disappearing over the trees. From its silhouette, we thought it might be a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), but we were unsatisfied with this identification. Quickly pursuing the bird to a nearby clearing, over which we saw it reappear circling and dipping, we examined it more closely with 8x binoculars; all at once we realized that we were looking at a Mississippi Kite.

Both birds were adults, free of markings except for a narrow, black mask on the lores and through the eyes and faint barring on the long, narrow, brownish, and slightly notched tail. The upper parts were blue-gray paling to pearl gray on the head and underparts. The primaries and secondaries were darker. The tarsi were yellow. The bill, remarkably small for a raptor, was horn-colored, and sharply down-curved into a fine-pointed hook, clearly seen in profile. The eyes were red. The birds were observed through a Bushnell 20x wide-angled telescope as they perched on an exposed tree limb some 200 feet away. Both birds had symmetrical gaps in the wings and tail, indicating molt. One had an especially large gap between the primaries and secondaries.

While perching, the kites had two poses. Immediately upon alighting for a brief pause, they held a distinctive horizontal stance, excellently illustrated by Arthur Singer in *Birds of North America* (Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Bruun and Herbert S. Zim, Golden Press, N.Y., p. 67.) When perched for more extended periods of time, the birds assumed a more upright posture, like that of Arthur Singer's illustration of the White-tailed Kite in the same book.

The kites exhibited two styles of flight. When in direct flight, they beat their wings in a shallow, fluttering manner and appeared to drag their tails behind them like a train. When hunting, however, they glided and soared, in a "figure 8" over the area under scrutiny, the long, pointed wings held stiffly outstretched, the tail either folded or fanned. At this time, Brood II of the 17-year cicadas (*Magicicada*) was at its peak of emergence in the area, and several times a kite was observed to snatch a cicada in mid-air and deftly strip off its wings, all in one easy motion, with hardly a flutter of the wings.

When harassed by crows, the kites further demonstrated their aerial mastery and fearlessness by only sometimes taking leisurely flight and then suddenly turning upon their surprised pursuers and giving leisurely pursuit themselves, thus obliging the crows to engage in strenuous efforts to chase or to flee, as the case might be. The crows soon learned to ignore these proficient newcomers. It was noted during these encounters that the kites seemed slightly larger than the crows, because of their longer wings and tail; in body size, they are actually no larger than jays.

It has been suggested that perhaps the kites had followed the successive emergence of the 17-year cicadas northward. They certainly had an abundant food supply, as the cicadas were in plague proportions throughout the "Green Belt" of Staten Island, where the kites ranged. Alternatively, the birds could have accompanied a large, warm, humid low-pressure system that came up from the Gulf states prior to their first sighting here. It was noted that the last reported sighting was prior to the arrival of a cool, high-pressure system. Perhaps both factors, food and weather, had an influence. Certainly Mississippi Kites are not new to the Northeast, having been reported in New Jersey and New England recently.

The Mississippi Kite is native to the southeastern United States. James W. Parker and John C. Ogden (*American Birds*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 119-129, March 1979) have documented a range expansion of this species, both northward and westward; these authors conclude by predicting that the range extension will continue. Perhaps then we can look forward to seeing this species again in our area.

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