

COMMENTS ON THE FIRST RECORDED OCCURRENCE OF MISSISSIPPI KITES IN NEW YORK

JAMES W. PARKER

Clermont (1979) presented a complete account of the first appearance of Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) in New York State. I was aware of the presence of the two kites shortly after they were first seen, and was considerably excited by the event, but because of an impending trip west to study prairie populations of this species, I could not travel to view the kites on Staten Island. Some comments on this event and some relevant biology of Mississippi Kites may be of interest to New Yorkers hoping to see this species here again.

The area frequented by the kites on Staten Island was very typical of the habitat chosen by an increasing number of urban-nesting kites in the Great Plains. Recently, my attention has been drawn to these kites which often forage and nest on golf courses and in municipal parks (Parker and Ogden, 1979; Parker, personal observation). Kites breed abundantly in Great Plains shelterbelts (windbreaks), and apparently have shifted readily to urban "woodlands" resembling shelterbelts. In the process they are apparently becoming accustomed to close human presence, and their nest defense behavior occasionally causes needless problems with human residents. If kites are soon found nesting in extralimital areas, it will probably be in habitat such as the birds used on Staten Island.

The kites seen in New York were described by Clermont as adults with "faint barring on the long, narrow, brownish and slightly-notched tail." However, adult kites have shiny black tails without any barring. The photograph by Bernie Paul prefacing Clermont's article clearly shows bands on the tail of the lower kite, but the angle of the tail of the upper kite would not show bands if they were present. The bars are usually three, fairly distinct and on the inner vanes of the rectrices, and are present only in the rectrices of the original juvenal plumage. These rectrices are worn by fledglings and are retained into the next summer after the kites have largely completed the molt into a gray-and-black adult head and body plumage (Bent, 1937; Parker, 1974, pers. obs.). The kites on Staten Island were apparently yearlings and not adults. If two bar-tailed kites were seen at one time, and one or more black-tailed kites were seen at another time, there would have been more than two kites present.

Yearling kites will mate and nest, and their frequency in Great Plains breeding colonies varies around 10 percent. However, in a number of other recent extralimital sightings of kites in Indiana (Mumford and Keller, 1975), Minnesota (Litkey, 1973; Janssen, 1975; Greenfield, 1980) and Wisconsin (Koroter, 1978; Knuth, 1980) at least three of six birds were yearlings. This indicates that yearling kites are more likely to wander than adults, as is the case with many bird species (Welty, 1975).

Clermont indicated that in body size kites are no larger than jays. Although Mississippi Kites are slim, their weight usually exceeds 250 gm and large females approach 325 gm. They do have much larger bodies than jays.

A number of authors (Brown and Amadon, 1968; Bent, 1937; Fitch, 1963; Sutton, 1939) indicate that kites are almost entirely insectivorous. Some, like Rising and Kilgore (1964), suggest that kites are dependent on cicadas in some areas. Recent work (Parker, 1974; unpublished data) shows that kites do take a significant amount of vertebrate prey and will also scavenge. The kites on Staten Island certainly would have opportunistically capitalized on the abundant 17-year cicadas. However, there is less reason to believe they followed cicada populations north than that they accompanied a major north-moving air mass.

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Biology, State University College, Fredonia, New York 14063