

## NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

### Swallow-tailed Kites in Western New York

This story begins on 30 July, 2020 when Vaughn Bates, while working on a private farm, noticed a pair of unusual raptors on the west side of Hamlin, Monroe County, NY. He identified them from a field guide and called another local birder who confirmed the identification of the two Swallow-tailed Kites on 2 August. This birder notified Willie D'Anna and mentioned the birds were seen on private property. Willie notified Andy Guthrie, who lives in the area; Andy searched parts of Hamlin but was unable to find the birds. We learned later that they were also photographed at the private farm by Kathy Habgood on 1 August (see photo on p. 364 and the Region 2 report, in this issue).

Exactly one week later, someone living on Roosevelt Highway (State Route. 18) in Hamlin also noticed the two kites near his home and obtained a photo of one of them on Thursday, 6 August. On Sunday morning, 9 August, he brought his sighting and photo to the attention of Dan Niven, one of the principal banders at Braddock Bay Raptor Research (BBRR). Dan immediately informed Mike Tetlow who then alerted several local birders about the hawks and revealed the first public information on where the birds were seen.

Now armed with the information on location, between Redman Rd. and County Line Rd. in Hamlin, birders started searching. By the late morning of 9 August, two Swallow-tailed Kites were being seen near Roosevelt Highway and Redman Rd. Since parking along Roosevelt Highway was difficult and birding along the road somewhat dangerous, a safer location to view from was a church parking lot near County Line Road. This location, the Mount Olive Baptist Church, was recognized as providing the best viewing opportunities. The birds were seen in all directions from there. On that Sunday, many people were able to see the two kites, often from a great distance, but occasionally one or both of the birds would fly directly over the church parking lot, providing magnificent views. Many birders came as the news spread on eBird, text alerts, and birding listservs. The kites were seen sporadically throughout the remainder of that day.

There were many observers every day and eBird reports daily until Sunday, 16 August. Many people were again searching for them on 17 August but they were not found. From the eBird reports, one could see that these birds ranged over an area of 1.5 miles from north to south and 1 mile east to west, approximately 1.5 square miles (4 sq. km.). However, there is little doubt that they ranged over a greater area than this. The area where the kites were seen was mostly agricultural with about 25 percent forest. Sandy Creek runs through the area and is forested along its path. The birds were often seen above this woodland.

The habitat seemed to be attractive to the kites because they remained there for over two weeks. They would catch insects in flight and were recorded eating dragonflies in flight. Andy Guthrie was also able to find them roosting at least once.

Many birders were able to get photographs. Analysis of the photos revealed they were likely juveniles based on the brown streaks on the breast. The ratio of the length of the outer tail feather to the distance from the rear edge of the wing to the end of the undertail coverts was measured from photographs and compared to photographs of adults. This ratio ranges from 1.0 to 1.2 for adults, whereas the two birds in Hamlin ranged from 0.8 to 0.9. The shorter tail would imply juveniles. (Dunn, J and J. Alderfer. 2017: *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. National Geographic Partners Washington, DC. p. 272.) Also, one of the birds showed buffy feathers around the neck and upper breast, also suggesting a juvenile.

It is possible that these birds dispersed northward with immature southern Bald Eagles. In mid-summer, there is an influx of these eagles in western New York, as recorded at BBRR. On 30 July Hurricane *Isaias* was near Haiti in the Caribbean. It reached the southern tip of Florida in the early morning of 2 August and South Carolina by late afternoon on 3 August. The kites could not have been swept north by that storm because of their earlier arrival in Hamlin.

There have been a number of eBird reports of Swallow-tailed Kites in the eastern US in August of this year. One was near Rushland, PA on 1-8 August. The northern-most report was a single at Luther Marsh, Ontario 3-8 August. The furthest west sighting was near Adrian, MI on 14-16 August. Another bird was near Newton Township, PA 14-17 August. There were eight records from northern Virginia to the Delmarva Peninsula this summer. Among these were reports of two birds at Woodsville, VA on 7 August and Cape May, NJ on 13 August. And finally, there were two reports from New Hampshire, from Lebanon on 9 August and Webster on 9-16 August.

The New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC) lists 21 accepted records of Swallow-tailed Kite in their online database and 18 of these are from spring. There is one late June record and one each from August and September. We are also aware that there have been some summer sightings that were never submitted to NYSARC.

There are a number of unusual aspects about the kites in Hamlin. First, this was a summer sighting, unlike most of the more eastern occurrences, which have been in spring. Second, there were two birds. The vast majority of sightings north of their known range are of single birds. Finally, they stayed in the area for at least 18 days, an unusually long stay for any sighting outside of their range.

We would like to thank those who provided help to many birders looking for this unusual species. We would also like to thank Andy Guthrie for providing sighting information and for background information for this summary, and Willie D'Anna for his comments on this note.

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Swallow-tailed Kite, Hamlin, *Monroe*, 1 Aug 2020, © Kathy Habgood. See pp. 326-327.