

THE SWALLOW-TAILED KITE: A REVIEW OF ITS OCCURRENCE IN THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIANS

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Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) was widely distributed as a breeding bird in the southeastern United States and throughout much of the Mississippi River basin, ranging as far north as Minnesota and Wisconsin. By the turn of the century, however, the inland population had declined precipitously, leaving the coastal plain swamps of the Southeast as the last stronghold for this graceful and elegant bird. In Minnesota, for example, Roberts (1932) spoke of the large numbers of kites that had nested in the state until the 1880s, when the bird inexplicably began to disappear, there being only eight records from 1900 until the last sighting in 1923. In fact, the rapid and thorough demise of the entire Mississippi valley population prompted Bent (1937) to comment: "The seemingly almost complete disappearance of this beautiful and once frequent bird is difficult to understand."

The disappearance of the Swallow-tailed Kite from the Mississippi basin coincided with the beginnings of serious ornithological studies in North Carolina. Consequently, few local ornithologists had the opportunity of observing the kite's movements through the state at a time when the species nested not only in the Southeast but widely through the interior of the continent. Nevertheless, a review of the extant records indicates that the status of the Swallow-tailed Kite has not been adequately defined in the Appalachians of North Carolina, for Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley (1942) made no mention of the species from the mountains of the state.

OBSERVATIONS

The earliest records of the Swallow-tailed Kite from the southern Appalachians came before the Civil War, when Maxcy Gregg of Columbia, S. C., related his experience with the bird in a letter to Thomas M. Brewer. Brewer (1859) quoted from Gregg:

"I may here mention, that I once in the end of July saw many of these Hawks sailing about near the top of the Balsam Mountain, one of the loftiest and wildest mountains in North Carolina . . . I was told by a mountaineer, who was a great hunter and very observant, that they are seen in that vicinity every summer. The circumstance attracted my attention, because I had never seen the Swallow-tailed Hawk in any other part of the mountains, from South Carolina to Virginia, although I had rambled a good deal through that region."

Unfortunately, it is impossible to be certain of the precise location of Gregg's records, for the name "Balsam Mountain" has been applied to peaks in the Great Smoky, Great Balsam, Plott Balsam, and Black Mountain ranges. Nevertheless, the observations provide the first evidence that the kite occurred in the Appalachian region during the late summer months.

Nearly half a century later, the writings of John Simpson Cairns revealed additional evidence of the species' presence in the mountains of North Carolina. In the first of three papers on the birds of Buncombe County, Cairns (1887) listed the Swallow-tailed Kite as merely "accidental." As the years passed, however, he apparently became more familiar with the species, subsequently (1889) giving its status as "seen occasionally in August."

By the time of Cairns' final publication (1891), his increased field experience prompted the comments:

"A few seen each season on the higher mountains. Transient, only during the fall."

Cairns also apparently mentioned the kite in his correspondence with Dr. J. W. P. Smithwick to assist in compiling an annotated checklist for North Carolina. Smithwick (1897) acknowledged these records by the comment:

"A few seen every fall in the higher mountains."

In addition to these published records, Cairns listed the species in a manuscript on the birds of western North Carolina (1894), giving its status as:

"Transient visitor, usually in October. Rare."

The publication of Cairn's papers attracted the interest of William Brewster of Harvard, and the two men began corresponding with regard to the avifauna of the southern Appalachians. Unfortunately, none of Brewster's letters have survived, although most of Cairn's replies are at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. In a letter dated 1 August 1887, Cairns inquired about Brewster's visit to the North Carolina mountains some two years earlier:

"Did you hear any thing about the Swallow-tailed Kite, in the western countys [sic]. Have been told that it used to occur in numbers in Yancy & Mitchell. Have observed it twice on Elk Mtn, both times in August."

In addition to these comments, Cairns later provided evidence that he possessed a specimen of the kite, although he gave no details concerning its origin. On 31 October 1888, Cairns inquired from Brewster:

"Can large mounted birds be taken down and turned into skins without injury. I have a number of mounted specimens that I wish to take down, among them are . . . Swallow-tailed Kite . . ."

Cairns' tragic death in 1895 brought an abrupt end to field ornithology in western North Carolina. Subsequently there have been only two sightings of the species in the Appalachian region, both within the past 20 years. Sprunt (1954) reported W. L. Pressley's observation of a single kite at High Hampton, Jackson County, on 17 October 1953. More recently, Norme D Frost (pers. com.) reported the sighting of a pair of kites by Mr. and Mrs. Paul G. Smith and Mrs. Sylvia Dodge near Tryon, Polk County, N. C. on 18 July 1968.

DISCUSSION

An examination of the above data suggests that the Swallow-tailed Kite may have formerly occurred as a fairly regular and not uncommon species in the Appalachian region of North Carolina during the late summer and early autumn months. Prior to 1860, Gregg reported seeing "*many*" of the birds in late July [*italics mine*], and he mentioned that a local hunter had informed him of their being "seen in that vicinity every summer." Cairns' papers likewise indicated that the bird was of regular occurrence in Buncombe County during the period of August through October, and he mentioned having "been told that it used to occur in numbers in Yancy & Mitchell." Gregg's report might be challenged as an isolated incident, and the second-hand reports mentioned by Gregg and Cairns certainly do not carry the weight of original observations. It is also unfortunate that the reports do not give specific dates, numbers, elevations, localities, and direction of movement, as such data would be invaluable in assessing the true extent of the species' occurrence in the Appalachians. Nevertheless, Cairns' studies during the period 1885 to 1895 indicated that the species occurred fairly regularly every year during the late summer and early autumn.

It is interesting to examine these records in light of the decline of the species as a breeding bird in the interior Mississippi basin. According to Roberts (1932) this decline became noticeable around 1880, with the species virtually disappearing by 1900. Gregg's

observations suggest that the species may have occurred in moderate numbers prior to the 1860s, and Cairns' correspondence with Brewster indicated that the bird used to "occur in numbers" in the area in earlier times. During the decade 1885-1895, Cairns regarded the bird as a regular fall transient but never found evidence of the larger concentrations mentioned by his friends or by Gregg. Furthermore, his final writing on the region (1894) lists the species as "Rare," suggesting that the bird may have declined noticeably during the 10-year period of his observations. Following his death, the species was not again reported from the Appalachians until 1953, during which period the kite was virtually absent from the Mississippi basin. Interestingly, the first modern record of the species from the North Carolina mountains followed its recurrence in the north central states, where Gunderson (1950) reported three individuals at different localities in Minnesota during August and October 1950, these sightings being the first in the region since the early 1920s. The data suggest, therefore, that the Swallow-tailed Kite's occurrence in the southern Appalachians has closely paralleled its population status in the Mississippi valley, with the species being fairly regular in both localities and declining sharply in both regions by the turn of the century.

The major question raised by these records concerns the nature of the migratory movement involved. Two possibilities exist to explain the origin of the individuals reported from the Appalachian region: (1) southward migration of adults, juveniles, or birds of both age groups from breeding grounds in the interior Mississippi basin or (2) northward postbreeding dispersal of adults, juveniles, or birds of both age groups from the southeastern coastal population. From the outset, it should be apparent that these two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, and both factors may be involved in the appearance of the birds in the mountains of the state. However, the remarkable parallel between the status of the bird in the Mississippi basin and its frequency of occurrence in the Appalachians strongly suggests that the reports of Gregg and Cairns involved individuals heading *south* across the mountains from the interior Mississippi River valley. Furthermore, Ralph S. Palmer (pers. com.) informs me that there appears to be a fairly extensive postbreeding dispersal to the N, NE, and W beginning in late June, with the true southward migration extending from mid-July through late September. The relatively late nature of the records from the Appalachians, coming primarily from August through October, suggests that the birds seen in the region represent south-bound individuals from the interior population of the upper Mississippi basin, rather than individuals dispersing northward. Furthermore, the absence of the bird in the mountains from 1895 to 1953 is difficult to explain on the basis of northward dispersal, because the southeastern coastal population has maintained itself throughout this period, albeit in reduced numbers. The most likely explanation, therefore, is that during the autumn months of the 1800s, the Swallow-tailed Kite migrated southward across the southern Appalachians from its breeding sites in the interior Mississippi River valley. In spite of the attractiveness of this hypothesis, however, the evidence is mostly circumstantial; and the exact nature and extent of the species' occurrence in the mountain region may never be determined satisfactorily.

Although only three Swallow-tailed Kites have been noted in the mountain region during the past 20 years, these records combined with recent reports from the upper Mississippi valley should alert bird students to the possibility of additional sightings in the southern Appalachians. Such observations, if forthcoming, might provide useful information concerning the migratory movement of the species in the Appalachians.

SUMMARY

Prior to 1900 the Swallow-tailed Kite apparently occurred fairly regularly in portions of western North Carolina during the late summer and early autumn months, although the species has been noted on only two occasions since the turn of the century. An apparent correlation between the species' abundance in the upper Mississippi valley and its occurrence in the southern Appalachians indicates the probability of a southward migration across the mountains by individuals nesting in the north-central portion of the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Ralph S. Palmer for migratory data on the species, to Norme D Frost for permission to publish his records, and to the Museum of Comparative Zoology for permission to quote from the Cairns-Brewster collection.

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