

General Field Notes

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First Confirmed Nesting of Mississippi Kite in North Carolina

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On 23 July 1995 I observed an active Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) nest in Laurinburg, North Carolina. An adult Mississippi Kite was seen several times feeding a preflight individual in the nest. While this species is a rare to locally common (along the Roanoke River) spring and summer resident in eastern North Carolina (Potter et al. 1980), this first discovery of an occupied nest confirms nesting of the species in the state.

I learned of the birds on 26 June 1995 in a telephone call from Mary Jane Wells of Laurinburg. Mrs. Wells lives at the site and called to tell me she had seen several unusual birds during the previous summer (1994). She thought that they were some type of kite and wondered if they could have nested. Through subsequent telephone calls, I learned that the kites had returned and their activity was centered around a hardwood grove in Laurinburg.

On the afternoon of 23 July 1995, I observed two Mississippi Kites soaring at 35 to 100+m over the site. Mrs. Wells and Steven and Hampton

Moore (age 5) of Fayetteville also observed them. The kites were light gray with a few white and brown feathers on their backs. Their bodies were slender, their heads light-colored, their bills small and hooked. Their mottled wings were long, narrow, tapered toward the tips, and at times cocked back at the wrists. They seldom flapped. Their tails were long and banded and widened slightly from the base to the tip. Depending on how much the birds flared their tails, the tip varied from almost straight to notched or slightly concave. I identified these birds as Mississippi Kites, and later determined that birds with these characteristics were year-old sub-adults (Clark 1987).

Within fifteen minutes, I observed a Mississippi Kite in full adult plumage circle the site. This bird was the same shape as the earlier birds, but its plumage was a crisp pattern of grays, black, and white. The head was light gray, the back, breast, belly and underwings were medium gray. The leading edges of the wings were darker gray and the trailing edges were white. The outer half of the wings and the entire tail were black. We heard the two-syllable call that Mrs. Wells had described in an earlier telephone conversation. I watched (through 10x binoculars at approximately 50 m) as this bird caught a large insect in its talons and ate it in mid-flight.

Several things led me to the nest. The birds' activity seemed to center around one tree and I noted a cycle of behavior in the adult kite(s). A pattern of circling, calling and lighting was repeated twice in fifteen minutes. On the third repetition of this pattern, I was able to watch a calling adult kite, holding something in its talons at the end of an outstretched leg, circle into the trees and land on the nest. The adult kite perched on the side of the nest and leaned into the nest with its tail hanging down. I observed the barred wing tips of the preflight nestling briefly flap into view over the top and sides of the nest. The others observed this behavior when the pattern was repeated again before we had to leave. Our observations occurred from 1330 to 1445 h on 23 July 1995.

The nest was located in a multi-branched fork of a living Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) approximately 23 m above the ground and within 2 m of the top of the tree. It was well shaded and partially obscured by the fully leafed crown. The nest was made up of sticks and twigs interlocked in a flat-topped mass approximately 50 cm wide by 25 cm deep.

The nest tree, with a diameter at breast height of 0.89 m, stood approximately a meter north of a row of Southern Red Oaks (*Quercus falcata*) lining W. Church Street (US 74-Bus.) which runs east/west within the city limits of Laurinburg. The oaks and the Sweetgum were of similar size. The upper branches of the trees intermingle. Other hardwoods including Pecan (*Carya illinoensis*), White Oak (*Quercus*

alba), Willow Oak (*Quercus phellos*), Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), and Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*) are nearby, as are Loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*). The nest tree was located at the corner of W. Church Street and Presbyterian Avenue on the property of First Presbyterian Church in a residential neighborhood across the street from a park. The site was a mix of open oak grove, well groomed lawns, woody thickets, dirt and paved parking lots, and playing fields.

On the evening of 23 July 1995, I called Taylor Piephoff to report the finding to the Carolina Bird Club Hot Line and confirm that this was indeed the first discovery of nesting Mississippi Kites in North Carolina. Consequently, Ricky Davis of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee suggested that the record was very important and complete written and photographic documentation was needed.

Piephoff and others observed the nest occupied by a preflight immature Mississippi Kite on 26 July 1995. They also saw up to six other kites of various ages. On 27 July 1995, I returned to photograph the nest and the kites. Wildlife biologists John Ann Shearer and Todd Earnhardt and photographer Chip East accompanied me. Shearer has had experience with raptors; she has hacked Bald Eagles, Ospreys and Peregrine Falcons.

The preflight immature was easily observed through 10x binoculars, a 40x scope, and telephoto lenses of 300 mm, 400 mm, and 560 mm focal lengths. The bird's downy head peered over the edge of the nest much of the time. The bird also climbed out of the nest and shuffled among the surrounding limbs several times. Both in and out of the nest, the bird stretched and flapped its wings, which were a mottled pattern of browns and grays. The bird's cream-colored breast, heavily streaked with reddish brown, was readily observed. This plumage is typical of immature Mississippi Kites (Clark 1987). We watched an adult bring food several times. We also observed an adult bring a long forked stick to the nest and weave it in. Photographs were taken that morning to document some of the behavior.

Observations continued the next morning on 28 July 1995 from 0915 to 1045 h. I returned with *Fayetteville Observer* photographer Cindy Burnham and reporter Eleanor Lee Yates. I was able to observe a Mississippi Kite for approximately 15 minutes as it perched and preened itself on a dead limb about 20 m up in one of the oaks. Through the scope I could see faint bars on the dark tail. This bird's body and wing plumage was marked with a few light and dark feathers that seemed out of place. These characteristics are field marks of a sub-adult (Clark 1987).

We spent about an hour watching the nest on 28 July 1995. The bird had not yet fledged and was even more active than on the previous day. It continued to hop in and out of the nest while flapping its wings. The

immature seemed to be fed by the adult(s) less frequently than on previous days. The length of the feeding contacts we observed between the immature and the adult(s) was also reduced.

On 30 July 1995, I returned with Frank Moorman of Fayetteville to continue observation of the kites. We spent several hours in the late afternoon observing the nest. We also attempted to determine the age of all of the other kites in the area. Moorman made two interesting observations. First, he observed at close range (20 m with 10x binoculars) an immature kite (an individual fledged this year) in addition to the immature kite still in the nest. Second, he observed this second immature briefly join the preflight immature in the nest. Adults and sub-adults were also seen. Photographs were taken.

We noted three things early in our observation of the nest. First, many of the free-flying kites were calling regularly to the kite in the nest. Second, compared to previous days, the preflight kite was hardly being fed. Third, the preflight kite was out of the nest and gradually edging farther away from it toward the top of the tree.

At approximately 1800 h on 30 July 1995, I watched the immature bird fledge. Its first flight took the bird across the street into one of the oaks. It was joined and fed shortly thereafter by an adult kite.

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