

Nesting Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

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An active Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) nest was confirmed in Mecklenburg County in 2014. This nest is the westernmost nesting of the Mississippi Kite reported in North Carolina and provides evidence for a western expansion of its breeding range here.

Locating the nest

On the morning of June 29, 2014, Lucy Quintilliano observed a Mississippi Kite land in a tree in the front yard of a house at the intersection of Shaftesbury Road and Essington Drive. She reported the presence of the bird.

A pair of kites was seen by local birders in the same general area the following day, and two were seen circling overhead daily after that. The kites were typically seen over one of three adjacent neighborhoods (Crown Colony, Hampton Leas and Bishops Ridge) about four miles north of Providence Springs Elementary School. This residential area is only one-tenth mile away from the Wilby Site, a designated Mecklenburg County Natural Heritage Site, and three-tenths of a mile from the McAlpine Creek greenway corridor which contains a significant stretch of floodplain forest and an active Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) rookery. Neighbors became very interested and began to report kite sightings to Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) project volunteers. They reported hearing the calls of the birds as well. Everyone was hoping to find a nest.

On July 7, 2014, Quintilliano noticed two kites fly into a tall sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) in the front yard of one house in the neighborhood. She immediately noticed the kites had become very agitated as she stopped near the tree to observe them. They soon became “aggressive”, circled low and actually dove towards her. She got a brief look at a nest and then left quickly to minimize the birds’ stress.

She returned later and from a distance could clearly see a stick nest at least 60 feet high very nearly hidden in foliage. She attempted to view the nest from several vantage points and was eventually able to see the tail and head of an

adult sitting on the nest. On July 24, 2014, she observed a chick's head peering over the edge of the nest, and she was able to take a crude picture of the young bird through her scope.

Observations of the nest and behavior

The precise location of this nest was never publicized to local birders as the kites continued to appear stressed by too much attention and activity around it. Quintilliano was surprised by the kites' aggressive behavior but later read that Mississippi Kites "become acclimated to (in fact, aggressive toward) people who get too close to nest sites" (Dunne 2006). She noted the pair seemed most aggressive when she wore brightly colored clothing. She was "chased" for several blocks by the kites when wearing bright orange, yellow or green walking attire designed to be highly visible in the dark.

On July 25, 2014, Phil Fowler attempted to photograph the birds in the nest. The attempt was technically challenging given how high and densely buried the nest was in the tree. During his stay a juvenile bird emerged onto a branch about 6 feet from the nest (Figure 1). Later, an adult arrived with what appeared to be a dragonfly, and the juvenile returned to the nest where it was fed. Fowler was able to repeatedly photograph the nest over a three-hour period without disturbing the birds. Some photographs were taken about 100 feet from the nest, and he was eventually able to take pictures over branches that had blocked the view from below (Figures 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 1. Juvenile on branch.



Figure 2. Adult feeding juvenile in nest.



Figures 3 & 4. Adult departing nest and adult with prey (dragonfly).

On August 3, 2014, while observing one adult feeding a juvenile, Quintilliano observed two other adult kites circling overhead. This was her first observation of more than two adults in the area. In the Great Plains this species is virtually communal - nesting, roosting, and foraging in groups of 50 or more - but it is generally a more solitary nester in the Southeast (Dunne 2006). It is possible more than one nest was present in the general vicinity. The date of fledging of the juvenile is unknown.

Historical records for Mississippi Kite breeding sites in North Carolina

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Mississippi Kite, like many raptor species, experienced decades of population decline and a contraction of its breeding range in the southeastern United States. In South Carolina, in the 1950's and 1960's, ornithologists began to document a small population increase and a slow northward expansion of breeding sites (Parker and Ogden 1979).

By the early 1970's, the Mississippi Kite was discovered in the coastal plain of North Carolina. The species was first reported during the breeding season along the Roanoke River in 1972 (Teulings 1972) and later in Anson County in 1975 (Teulings 1976) and again in 1979 (LeGrand 1979). Breeding was suspected in the Roanoke River region, along the state line in Anson County, and along the Waccamaw and Lumber rivers, but no active nests had been confirmed (Teulings 1975). Merrill Lynch, a biologist with the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, believed these kites represented "a recent range expansion as a result of the "spillover effect" from population increases further south in South Carolina" and that the expansion of breeding into North Carolina was "not a reoccupation of former range" (Lynch 1981).

In 1995, the first active nest of Mississippi Kite was finally confirmed in the state (Broadfoot 1995). On July 23, a nest was discovered by Mary Jane Wells and Hal Broadfoot in the top of a tall sweetgum tree, in a residential neighborhood in the town of Laurinburg, in Scotland County. This site was about 15 miles north of a known breeding location near Bennettsville, SC and about 25 miles east of Anson County. Since 1995, the Mississippi Kite has continued to slowly expand as a breeding resident in North Carolina.

Historical record for Mississippi Kite in western North Carolina

Until recently, sightings of Mississippi Kite in the Charlotte region were very rare. In fact, prior to 1980, there had been only four published records of Mississippi Kite in the entire central Piedmont and mountain region of North Carolina. Two were killed in Cherokee County in 1893, one was seen in Durham County in April 1976 and one was reported from Cedar Mountain in June 1976 (Lynch 1981). Sightings in the central and western part of the state

began to increase very slowly in the 1980's and 1990's.

The first Mississippi Kite observed in Mecklenburg County was seen on October 6, 1983. David Wright watched an adult bird in flight over the town of Davidson. His detailed description of the account was reviewed and his sight record was published in *The Chat* (LeGrand 1984). In 1984, Bill Hilton reported a kite in York County, South Carolina, just south of Charlotte on August 2nd (LeGrand 1984).

David Wright reported a second sighting of this species in Mecklenburg County on September 15, 1989 after he watched a group of 11 kites fly over University City Lake during fall migration (Wright, pers. comm.). Despite the relatively close proximity of a breeding population in eastern Anson County, no Mississippi Kites were reported in Mecklenburg County for another twenty years.

In the spring of 2009, Richard Fletcher and Ken Kneidel reported sighting a pair of Mississippi Kites active around the campus of Providence Springs Elementary School, east of Providence Road and south of Country Lane, in southern Mecklenburg County. The pair remained active there the entire summer and many local birders came to see them.

One local observer, Taylor Piephoff, reported seeing two fledged juveniles with the adults in early August (Piephoff, pers. comm.). The birds may have nested in a tall sweetgum tree that was used as a favorite perch, but nesting was not confirmed (according to established BBA protocol). Richard Fletcher reported that a pair of adults returned to the same location on April 18 in 2010.

Birders assisting with the BBA project reported four kites in the same general area in May 2010, three kites within a few miles of this site in 2011 and kites present again in 2012, but no nest was discovered. In 2013, several BBA volunteers reported up to four Mississippi Kites sighted at various times between April and August at several locations within a five-mile radius of the original school site and again no nest was found.

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Eastern Towhee
Charlotte, NC
Photo by Gary P. Carter