

Bulletin of the

OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Vol. XVI

June, 1983

No. 2

BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE IN OKLAHOMA: 1860 and 1982

BY WILLIAM A. CARTER AND CHARLES L. FOWLER

On 1 July 1982 at 0945 (CDT), as we were finishing the final stop of 50 on a Breeding Bird Survey sponsored by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Oklahoma Route 002, Blanco) in southeastern Latimer County, southeastern Oklahoma, a gull-like bird hovering over a woodland edge caught our attention. Atop the bend of each wing a patch of black was conspicuous, but the remainder of the plumage — head, underparts, back, and tail — was white. We watched the bird for 20 minutes alternately perch in dead branches atop a large tree, sally out short distances and return, or hover over an open meadow nearby. We felt certain that the bird was a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*, formerly called White-tailed Kite) a species which we had frequent-



BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE

Adult photographed by John S. Shackford on 20 July 1982 near its nest in Latimer County, Oklahoma.

ly encountered in Colima and Jalisco, Mexico in June and July of 1975.

John S. Shackford, John S. Tomer and Carter returned to the site on 4 July at 1330 and almost immediately spotted an adult kite. After about 20 minutes, another kite suddenly sailed into view. While both kites sat quietly in the top of a huge tree, we approached to within 100 yards of them. Suspecting that they had a nest, we began to search for it in trees nearby, with both kites circling not far above our heads all the while. Having failed to locate a nest, we concealed ourselves behind some woody underbrush not far away where we could observe the perch-tree. Presently, both kites returned to it and sat quietly for several minutes. Soon they began making brief sorties out over the open grasslands adjacent the timber, but always returned to the big tree. After 15 minutes or so the (presumed) female flew from the perch-tree to a dead snag, clutching in her talons an animal about the size of a cotton rat (*Sigmodon hispidus*). She bit at this prey for a few minutes, then picked it up and winged her way directly into the woods. We followed as quickly as we could and flushed the kite from its bulky nest approximately 50 feet up in a shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) that was about 65 feet tall. On 9 July, Shackford, Carter and William G. Voelker returned. Voelker climbed to the nest and found three young birds that he estimated were at least 14 days old.

Voelker again visited the nest on 20 July and banded all three chicks. Both adults were near the nest. As he was leaving, he noticed still another Black-shouldered Kite circling far to the north. After carefully watching this bird, he located a second nest about two miles northeast of the first. Voelker climbed to this nest and banded its two young, which were approximately the same age as those banded earlier. At this nest, however, Voelker did not see a second adult kite.

From late July until 3 October, several other persons observed the kites. The following observations are noteworthy: in the environs of the second nest, Shackford and Carter on 2 and 3 August could find only one immature kite (breast streaked with brown; plumage generally duskier than adult's) and as it soared over, they could see that it had no band. Intensive searches in both nest areas failed to turn up a single adult bird. Conceivably, this young kite might have been hatched by a third pair not found earlier, but also might have also fledged from an earlier nesting at one of the two known nests. The species is known to sometimes be double brooded and incubation and fledging periods together require only about nine to ten weeks (Brown, L., and D. Amadon, 1968, *Eagles, hawks and falcons of the world*, Vol. 1, McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, pp. 238, 240). However, this young bird could have lost its band or may have wandered into the area from Texas or Arkansas.

On 24 and 25 September, Shackford and Carter found at least five kites about 1½ miles east of the nest areas, but were unable to determine the age of all of them (although at least one was immature and two were adults) or whether any were banded. These birds were cruising over open grasslands next to a forest of mixed hardwoods.

Shackford and several Oklahoma City Audubon Society members saw a total of six kites in the same area on 2 October, but could locate only four of them the next morning. These observers were likewise unable to determine much about age or banding condition. In succeeding days, several other people tried to find the kites, but none was seen after 3 October. The open grassy stretches over which the kites hunted for food are projected to be inundated by Sardis Lake, a Corps of Engineers flood control project within the Jackfork Creek Basin.

Astoundingly, the only other record of *Elanus caeruleus* in Oklahoma was in 1860 (M. M. Nice, 1931, *The birds of Oklahoma*, Rev. ed., Publ. Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):70). Nice stated: "Formerly a rare summer resident . . . It is strange that this specimen of a breeding bird and her eggs should be the only record of the occurrence of this bird in Oklahoma. One of the eggs was chosen as the type specimen." The specimens, an adult female (USNM 17306) and her clutch of four eggs (USNM 2927) were collected on 9 May, 1860 by Charles S. McCarthy and James H. Clark about 25 miles from Fort Arbuckle in the Chickasaw Nation (not Choctaw Nation as reported incorrectly by G. M. Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 96), Indian Territory.

Black shouldered Kite population changes and range expansion in North and Middle America have been documented by E. Eisenmann (1971, *Am. Birds* 25:529-536) and updated by S. G. Pruett-Jones *et al.* (1980, *Am. Birds* 34:682-688) and D. Larson (1980, *Am. Birds* 34:689-690). The numbers of kites observed during the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Counts in Texas the past few years (from *Am. Birds*) were: 1976-98 kites (10 different counts), 1977-201 kites (20 CBC's), 1978-210 kites (15 CBC's), 1979-209 kites (18 CBC's), 1980-232 kites (19 CBC's), and 1981-200 kites (16 CBC's). Sightings were reported during 1981 in Arkansas (Imhof, T. A., 1981, *Am. Birds* 35:832), Indiana (Peterjohn, B. G., 1981, *Am. Birds* 35:829), and Nebraska (Williams, F., 1982, *Am. Birds* 36:192).

The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Committee on Classification and Nomenclature now considers the White-tailed Kite, *E. leucurus*, conspecific with *E. caeruleus* of the Old World (1982, Thirty-fourth supplement to the AOU check-list of North American birds, *Suppl. to Auk* 99(3):4CC). Because *caeruleus* is the older species name, *leucurus* is no longer valid and the English name — White-tailed Kite — was changed to Black-shouldered Kite by the AOU Committee.

EAST CENTRAL UNIVERSITY BIOLOGY DEPARTMENT AND CROSSTIMBERS RANCH, ROUTE 7, BOX 394,
ADA, OKLAHOMA 74820, 17 FEBRUARY 1983.