

AVIAN PREY TAKEN BY MISSISSIPPI KITES IN OKLAHOMA

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Prior to the middle of the past century, there were no records of capture of avian prey by Mississippi Kites (*Ictinia mississippiensis*). A. C. Bent (1937) stated "...all writers seem to agree that the Mississippi Kite feeds almost exclusively on larger insects such as cicadas, locusts, grasshoppers, crickets, katydids, dragonflies, and large beetles, but snakes, lizards, and frogs are sometimes taken." He also stated "...birds apparently are never molested, and small birds know no fear of it." Sutton (1986) wrote "I found little evidence that the birds preyed on birds, mammals, or reptiles: but in other parts of Oklahoma many small rodents, small lizards, and such birds as Chimney Swifts are captured" (this last sentence refers to avian prey found under a nest tree by Ports [1976]). In a study done in western Oklahoma, Parker (1999) reported that Mississippi Kites consumed vertebrates including reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and at least 14 species of birds.

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Fig 1. Mississippi Kite with a recently depredated House Sparrow taken 10 July 2004 in Oklahoma City. Photograph by Bill Horn.

There are 4 published Oklahoma records for Mississippi Kites attacking and/or preying on birds: Waggener (1975) observed a kite striking and knocking down a Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*) in Lawton, Comanche County; Ports (1976) reported possible predation on Chimney Swifts based on remains of ≥ 2 swifts found under a kite nest in Oklahoma City; also in Lawton, DeVilbiss (1989) watched a kite catch a Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) which it carried for a few seconds, then released; and Hopkins (1995) saw a kite strike and knock a Chimney Swift to the ground behind his Lawton residence. Melinda Droege stated, "On 22 June 1980, I was in Enid, Garfield County, Oklahoma watching about 10 or 12 Chimney Swifts circling overhead. A Mississippi Kite dove into the flock, captured 1, and flew off. I did not see where it went or if it ate the smaller bird" (2004, pers. comm.).

At 1030 h on 5 July 2003, I was sitting in my yard in Broken Bow, McCurtain County, and heard a sound resembling wind in wings, such as is made by a stooping bird of prey. I looked up to see a House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) fluttering about 3 m above the ground and 5 m from my position. I heard the same sound again and then observed an adult Mississippi Kite dive and capture the House Finch, making a loud "slapping" sound upon contact. The kite then flew off with the finch, disappearing over the trees so I could not observe whether the finch was later dropped or carried to a perch or nest (there were 2 kite nests near my house at this time).

Prior to capture, the House Finch was flying in a manner that I have previously observed in finches afflicted with an avian pox. This malady results in swelling around the eyes and eventual blindness. Vision-impaired finches usually continue to use feeders, but must fly slowly, in a manner that is practically hovering, as they seek the feeder or a perch.

Verajean Hatfield studied nesting habits of Mississippi Kites in west Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma from 1975 to 1986. During this time, she found a headless immature Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) in 1 nest and remains of recently fledged Purple Martins under another nest (2004, pers. comm.). Hatfield also stated "...there was a graveyard of Chimney Swift feathers beneath one nest," indicating that 1 or both adults were regularly feeding Chimney Swift prey to the nestlings, but she gave no estimate of number of individual swifts. She noted that most bird parts found beneath kite nests were from immature birds, which apparently were more vulnerable.

On 14 July 2004, Patti Muzny flushed a Mississippi Kite from a large sycamore tree (*Platanus occidentalis*) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. She observed that the kite held a dark-colored bird with a notched tail, which was calling as the kite flew off. The size, color, and calls of this prey strongly indicated it was a Purple Martin, many of which use nest boxes in her

yard (2004, pers. comm.).

On 2 July 2004, Forrest Brock flushed a Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) from his driveway in Anadarko, Caddo County, Oklahoma. When it was about 5 m high and 10 m from him, a Mississippi Kite flew from the top of a red maple (*Acer rubrum*) and captured the dove, which it held until it disappeared from his view (2004, pers comm.).

While photographing nesting Mississippi Kites in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, on 10 July 2004, Bill Horn watched a pair of kites leave the nest and return about 20 min later; one carrying a bird. He was able to photograph this kite (Fig. 1) feeding on its prey, which it did not share with its mate. Horn believes that the prey species was a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), and his photograph substantiates his belief.

Recent observations of kites capturing and feeding on avian prey could be due to more persons watching birds than ever before, range expansion by kites, more intensive research into kite behavior, or because, "kites today may rely somewhat more on vertebrates than in earlier times, evidently because of changed habitat conditions in the twentieth century" (Bolen and Flores 1993:66).

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