

# Kansas Ornithological Society

## BULLETIN

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### THE SWALLOW-TAILED KITE RETURNS TO KANSAS

Woods<sup>1</sup>

The Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) has been extirpated from Kansas for many years. Thus on 6 September 1972 at 15:24 CDT I was extremely surprised to see an adult swallow-tail gliding buoyantly above the trees along the Kaw River, one mile northwest of Topeka. At first the bird was closest to me, above the trees of the opposite bank and slightly upstream. I had an unobstructed view as it rather leisurely progressed upstream and disappeared around a bend at 15:31. It reappeared on three occasions, coming part way down stream and keeping above the tree-lined bank, then returning upstream behind the river bend. I last saw it at 16:15, having observed it for a total of 17 minutes. I have observed the species in southern Florida and so recognized it immediately.

Its flight was basically very buoyant gliding. The wind was very gusty and the bird rode at various heights above the trees, changing altitude freely on the wind. It was usually 50 to 100 feet above the trees. Whenever the bird turned to go again upstream it would gain altitude. Occasionally it flapped its wings several times in succession. The long, pointed wings were usually held so that the forward edge formed a curve as it glided. The bird spread its tail frequently, emphasizing the conspicuous fork. The kite was large, dwarfing the swallows and swifts flying nearby. It was pure white beneath and the head and neck were white. The underwing coverts were white but the undersides of the flight feathers and tail appeared pure black. Above, the bird appeared pure black except for the head and neck. I noted no white flecks on the back or buffy color elsewhere which would have indicated a young bird.

I have since consulted about two dozen published references on the species and find considerable apparent contradiction concerning the adult plumage coloration among even the most recent references. I saw the upperparts of this bird reasonably well and saw no white band or spots across the lower back or rump, a character mentioned by many authorities. Therefore I wrote two museum curators requesting them to examine specimens in their collections. Six adults in the American Museum of Natural History and fifty adults of both races in the United States National Museum were examined and all showed some white in the lower back area. In the USNM series the amount of white was reported to vary but I do not know to what extent. I personally examined three adult skins (two in the Goss Collection, one at the University of Kansas) and among these noted a substantial difference in the amount of white in the lower back area, although all showed some white.

The solid black back of my bird was comparable to one portrayed by the artist W. A. Weber (*in* Wetmore, *et al.*, 1965:222). Weber shows no white although some other artists do. Many published descriptions distinctly fail to mention the presence of white. Most convincingly, an excellent published color photograph of the dorsal aspect of an adult in flight (Wright, *et al.*, 1971:47; also see p. 45) shows no white. The apparent conflict concerning the presence of white is perhaps resolved by the statement of Grossman and Hamlet (1964:213): "White rump patch may show if a bird is in molt." I suspect that the white, though probably

<sup>1</sup> Robert Sutherland prefers to be known as "The man who walks in the woods" or "woods."

always present, is hidden and restricted during certain periods, quite extensive and apparent at others. Possibly the white feathers later become considerably reduced through wear. The plumages and molts of this species apparently need further study.

The species bred in Kansas formerly; the last specimen was taken in Greenwood County on 17 May 1914 (Johnston, 1965:15). I can find only extremely vague statements concerning its supposed occurrence in the state since then. J. A. Allen (1872: 130) reported seeing several pairs at Topeka (Shawnee County) in May 1871; his report is the only definite previous county record. The statement by Bent (1937: 52) that the species bred west to Topeka was probably based on Allen's sightings.

According to the National Weather Service Office at Topeka, area winds during the period 2 to 6 September 1972 were from the south and east, which may account for this unusual occurrence. However, apparently the species has become more frequent in Texas in recent years, and two 1972 sightings in Arkansas, both suggest a possible range expansion.

I thank Dean Amadon, M. Ralph Browning, John Bull, James Parker, and others for assistance, especially in examining specimens not available to me.

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#### **Violet-green Swallow at the Cheyenne Bottoms Waterfowl Management Area.—**

I observed a single Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*) five miles north and two miles east of Great Bend, Barton County, Kansas, on 14 September 1972. The bird was in the company of several hundred swallows of several species that were feeding over the water just east of the headquarters building at the Cheyenne Bottoms Waterfowl Management Area.

The green, white-flanked swallow skimmed the water surface for a drink about 50 feet from where I stood on the inlet canal dike. The afternoon sun (16:30 hours) was behind me and permitted an excellent view of the bird. After drinking, it crossed the dike and disappeared to the southwest. I remained for most of an hour in the area but failed to see the bird again that evening.

On 24 September 1972, Orville Rice, Elizabeth Cole and several other members of the Kansas Ornithological Society saw a Violet-green Swallow during the K.O.S. fall field trip. This bird was in the company of several thousand swallows near the junction of pools 1, 2 and 3 in the Cheyenne Bottoms WMA. Either there was more than one bird in the flock, or the same bird was seen at different times during the day.

On 4 November 1972, a single Violet-green Swallow was observed for 20 minutes with three spotting scopes and several binoculars as it sat on a wire just west of the Cheyenne Bottoms WMA headquarters building. Observers were Ed and Seliesia Pendleton, the junior high biology class from Liberty, Missouri, and myself. The swallow was alone and no other swallows were seen that day.

According to Johnston (A directory to the birds of Kansas, *Univ. Kans. Mus. Nat. Hist., Misc. Publ.*, 41:35, 1965) there are no specimens of this species from Kansas. It has been included on the hypothetical list from the sighting of five birds by L. B. Carson at Lake Shawnee, Shawnee County, 14 April 1947. MARVIN D. SCHWILLING, *Route 1, Great Bend, Kansas 67530*.

**Nesting success of Great Horned Owls using artificial platforms.**—During December 1970 four artificial nest platforms were erected in woodlots known to contain Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*). The platforms were made of one-half inch hailscreen and measured 1m × 1m. This square was then rounded by bending the corners upward to form a modified cup. Care was taken to ensure that the sharp wire edges were either cut off or bent in such a way as to offer minimal danger to adult or juvenile birds. The “nests” were transported to the woodlots, raised by rope and secured with fence staples. The nests were placed at least 6m high and located where the tree formed a fork. All platforms were located in tall, healthy, deciduous trees. After stapling, a lining of sticks, bark and dead grass was placed inside the cup. No extensive attempt was made to make the platform resemble a hawk’s or crow’s nest. Care was taken, however, to assure that the added nesting materials would provide adequate insulation for the future incubation of eggs.

In the winter of 1971 none of the platforms was used. A pair did, however, raise a single chick within 50 m of one platform. The chick was raised in a tree cavity 4m above ground. Additional field work showed that other pairs, if they nested, did not use the woodlots which contained the platforms. The sites were checked on several additional occasions but showed no evidence of use.

For over a year the nest platforms remained unused. On 6 February 1972, while on a routine check of the woodlots, I observed a female using a platform. On 20 February she was flushed from her two eggs. She continued to incubate until the first week of March, when the chicks hatched.

Meanwhile, I had lost track of another female which had attempted nesting dangerously close to a county road. On 28 March she was found on a nest platform a short distance from her nest site of the previous year. On 3 April she was flushed from the nest containing a two to three week old chick and one addled egg. All three birds which hatched on the artificial platforms continued to do well. The first bird fledged between 7–11 April; the single owl on 23 April. The other two platforms were checked several times during the season but no nesting activity was observed.

Great Horned Owls are opportunistic with regard to finding an appropriate nest. Eggs have been found in barns, abandoned cars, dirt banks and even on the ground. Often the birds will attempt to nest where the success of raising chicks is extremely doubtful. The use of artificial nest platforms could be used to promote nesting in relatively safe places. In addition, the platform could be a valuable tool for the researcher who wishes to study distribution, prey selection, or nesting preference. PERRY CONWAY, 2418 Buena Vista, Manhattan, Kansas 66502.

**Ground Doves in Barton and McPherson Counties, Kansas.**—A Ground Dove (*Columbigallina passerina*) was observed by the senior author daily at the residence of the Cheyenne Bottoms Waterfowl Management Area, Walnut Creek Dam, three miles north of Great Bend, Barton County from 10 through 19 October 1972.

When first observed, the small dove was in the company of two Mourning Doves loafing on the ground under a double row of Russian Olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) at the edge of a wildlife food plot. Two to eight Mourning Doves used the food plot with the Ground Dove until they moved out on 16 October, leaving only the Ground Dove. On 19 October, one primary feather, parts of two other primaries and a few body feathers were found in the small dove’s loafing area, and it was not seen after that date. The feathers are now preserved at Fort Hays Kansas State College (FHKSC).

On 11 October, a dead Ground Dove was found on the patio of the Clayton Griggs residence, 808 S. Ash, McPherson, McPherson County. The bird had died as a result of a collision with a patio window that afternoon. This specimen will be placed in the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History in the near future.

There are two previous specimens from Kansas, one each from Anderson and Greenwood Counties, as well as sight records from Pottawatomie and Lyon Counties (Johnston, A directory to the birds of Kansas, Univ. Kans. Mus. Nat. Hist., Misc. Publ., 41:28, 1965). MARVIN D. SCHWILING, *Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game*

Commission, Route 1, Great Bend, Kansas 67530 and STEPHEN W. CAPEL, Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission, 1314 Eastmoor, McPherson, Kansas 67460.

**Forgotten records of the Painted Bunting in Kansas.**—Mengel (Kans. Orn. Soc. Bull., 21:7-8, 1970) described a "second definite nesting record" of the Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) for Kansas at Lawrence, Douglas County. He cited an earlier record "in the spring of 1918", also in Lawrence (Reed, Auk, 39:269, 1922), as the first definite nesting record. Mengel suggested that although the Painted Bunting is "rare and very local" toward the northern and western limits of its range, in view of the two nesting records reported and the widespread localities represented by 18 specimens in the University of Kansas, Museum of Natural History, the species is more common than had been thought.

While searching through material published from 1900 through 1950 for articles by Albert J. B. Kim, well known Texas field naturalist who also worked in Kansas and Oklahoma, I found a note entitled *Supposed New Record for Central Kansas* (Condor, 20:191, 1918). In it Kim stated that on 10 June 1918 he found a nest containing three Painted Bunting eggs near Solomon, eastern Saline County, Kansas. He added that neither he nor A. K. Boyles, Salina taxidermist, had seen this species in the area before, although they were both familiar with the species in northern Oklahoma. Kim returned three days later and collected the clutch of eggs and the female bunting; he did not see the male. He described the female as "distinctly colored on the back, a bright greenish-olive" and the eggs as "well spotted, all the other species of buntings laying plain unspotted eggs."

The next year Kim reported the species again near Solomon (Condor, 21:236, 1919). On 30 June and 2 July, he saw a male Painted Bunting near the same place where he had collected the female and eggs the year before. Also in 1919 he reported seeing (op. cit.), near Chanute, Neosho County, a male several times from 23-27 July, a second male on 25 July and a third male on 27 July "each in a different locality and several miles apart." He further reported seeing a Painted Bunting on 8 August 1919 "just north of Altoona, Wilson County, Kansas." Although he found no nests in these southeastern Kansas counties, he thought nests were very likely there.

Kim's nesting record appears to be the second nesting record of the Painted Bunting in Kansas and Mengel's the third. The chronological order of the records is of little importance but it is significant that Kim found the species nesting in central Kansas in an area nearly as far north as Lawrence and considerably to the west. This supports Mengel's statement that the species is "rare and very local" approaching "the northern, and particularly the western parts" of its range. EMMA H. MESSERLY, 344 S. E. Elmhurst, Bartlesville, Oklahoma 74003.

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