

White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*

The White-tailed Kite is not only one of southern California's most elegant birds of prey, it is one of the most interesting, because of its communal roosting, history of steep rises and falls in population, and concentration on a single species of prey, the California vole or meadow mouse. Though the kite is found in San Diego County year round, its numbers vary with those of the vole and the shifting of communal roosts. Unfortunately, urbanization of the grasslands in which kites forage threatens the recovery the species enjoyed from the late 1930s to the 1970s.

Breeding distribution: The White-tailed Kite is widespread over the coastal slope of San Diego County, preferring riparian woodland, oak groves, or sycamore groves adjacent to grassland. Regions of concentration are in the northwest from Camp Pendleton to Carlsbad and Vista, in the central region from Los Peñasquitos Canyon through Miramar to Poway, and in the south from the Tijuana River valley to Otay Mesa and Otay lakes. In the foothills the species is less common than in the coastal lowland but still fairly widespread—substantially more widespread than reported previously (Unitt 1984). It is absent from most of the higher mountains but occurs uncommonly up to about 4200 feet elevation in the Julian area with up to six, including a pair at a nest, at Wynola (J19) 22 May 1999 (S. E. Smith). It has been seen repeatedly at 4600–4700 feet elevation around Lake Cuyamaca (M20), where most birds are probably postbreeding dispersers (up to three on 6 August 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan).

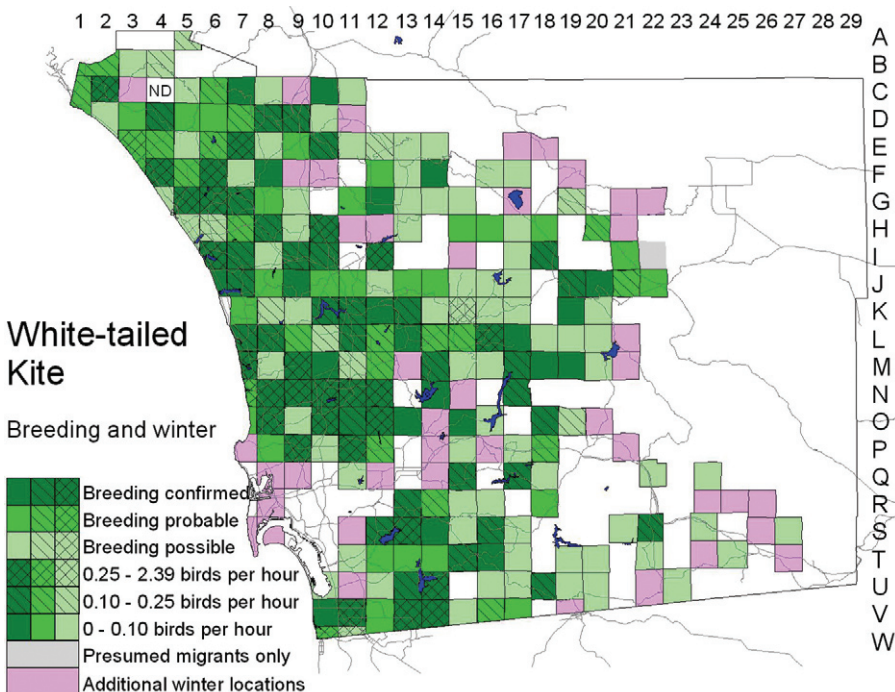
The kite's range spills over the east side of the mountains possibly in McCain Valley (S27; juvenile 14 May



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

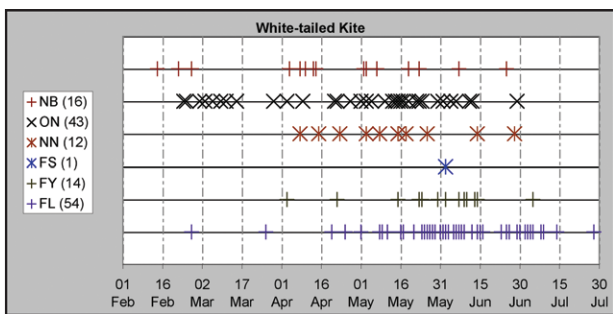
1999, M. Sadowski), certainly in San Felipe Valley, where there are many reports, including a pair with a probable nest in the upper valley (H20) 1 May 1998 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan) and a pair in courtship display near Scissors Crossing (J22) 13 April 1998 (E. C. Hall). Note that these suggestions of breeding were in the wet El Niño spring of 1998; monitoring at Scissors Crossing in two dry to average years, 2002 and 2003, yielded only occasional postbreeding visitors (J. R. Barth). The Anza–Borrego Desert State Park database has several records of the White-tailed Kite through the spring and summer, mostly of single individuals with no suggestion of breeding, but three were at Middle Willows (C22) 7 May 1972.

Nesting: White-tailed Kites build their nest in the crowns of trees, especially the coast live oak, or on clumps of mistletoe, both of which screen the nest well. They use nonnative trees freely, especially orange trees, as citrus orchards often offer good foraging (Dixon et al. 1957). Occasionally they use large shrubs such as scrub oak or toyon.



Research Institute (2004) found the kite to constitute essentially the same percentage of the raptor fauna of southwestern San Diego County in winter as in summer. Atlas observers did find the species a bit more frequently in marginal areas like Warner Valley, Ranchita (G21/G22), Lake Cuyamaca, and McCain Valley in winter than in summer. Also in winter a few birds entered the developed areas of the city of San Diego, where kites are lacking during the breeding season.

The most notable aspect of the kite's nonbreeding biology is its communal roosting. From 1997 to 2002, flocks were reported from near the upper end of Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6; up to 21 from 1 to 9 December 1998, L. E. Taylor, P. A. Ginsburg) and at the



mouth of Spring Canyon, Mission Trails Regional Park (P11; up to 50 from 3 December 1998 to 7 February 1999, D. Mooney). In the latter case the flock was observed through the middle of the day. Another notable diurnal concentration was 113 (mostly juveniles) scattered over eastern Otay Mesa (V14) 31 July 1999 (S. D. Cameron).

Dixon et al. (1957) reported eggs from 6 February to 10 July, with 10-day-old young in one nest 22 February, suggesting laying about 12 January. Our observations from 1997 to 2002 imply laying from late January to May, except that a brood of newly fledged young in lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 27 February 1999 (B. C. Moore) must have hatched from a clutch laid around 1 January. From 1997 to 2001, all our early nestings of the kite were in 1999, following the wet spring of 1998, when rodent numbers were still high. Late nestings were in both 1998 and 1999. Our number of nesting confirmations per year similarly shows the effect of variation in rainfall and presumably in prey: 15 in 1997, 41 in 1998, 72 in 1999, 7 in 2000, and 11 in 2001.

Conservation: In the 19th century the White-tailed Kite was probably uncommon in San Diego County; A. M. Ingersoll told Willett (1912) that "from 1887 to 1892 he saw White-tailed Kites frequently in the vicinity of San Diego and knew of two pairs nesting in that region." From 1892 to 1920, however, the species went unrecorded and was probably extirpated. One pair nested 5 miles east of Del Mar (M8) in 1920, and one bird was shot at the Tijuana River mouth (V10) on 15 January 1930 (Huey 1931b). Dixon et al. (1957) saw no kites in northern San Diego County from 1900 to 1935, but then they colonized and increased, becoming common by 1956. San Diego Christmas bird counts show an upsurge in 1965, though this was due in part to the count circle's being shifted to include the Tijuana River valley. The population probably peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s. Long-term trends are difficult to track because the kites' numbers vary with rain and rodent numbers and the shifting of roost sites. Nevertheless, results of the Oceanside Christmas bird count may be a gauge; its circle once consisted largely of prime kite habitat. From 1976 to 1983 this count averaged 72; from 1997 to 2002 it averaged 30.

Migration: The White-tailed Kite is nonmigratory but nomadic and dispersive. Dixon et al. (1957) reported a bird banded as a nestling in San Diego County recovered about 100 miles north two years later. The birds invaded San Clemente Island in 1984, one year after El Niño rains (Scott 1994). Records for the Anza-Borrego Desert in the state park database are scattered rather evenly through the year.

Shooting was likely responsible for the kite's first decrease. Agriculture may have been a boon to the species, as it nests and feeds commonly in orchards. But with citrus growing no longer profitable in San Diego County many groves have been developed into housing tracts. Most grassland has also already been lost. Poisoning of rodents may be affecting the kite by depressing its food

Winter: The White-tailed Kite's winter distribution differs little from the breeding distribution. The Wildlife

supply. The disappearance of kites from the long-developed areas of the city of San Diego is obvious from the map and suggests a scenario for the rapidly urbanizing areas of northern San Diego County. Another possible negative factor is the proliferation of crows and ravens; Dixon et al. (1957) reported crows robbing kites of their prey repeatedly; D. Bittner has observed ravens doing the same.

Taxonomy: The subspecies of White-tailed Kite in North America is *E. l. majusculus* Bangs and Penard, 1920, larger than the nominate subspecies of South America. The White-tailed Kite has sometimes been considered conspecific with the Black-shouldered Kite (*E. caeruleus*) of the Old World; at these times the name Black-shouldered Kite has been applied to the birds in the New World as well.