

Swallows return to Capistrano, buzzards return to Hinckley, Ohio, and Swallow-tailed Kites return to Corkscrew, all on uncannily predictable schedules. Kites arrive at Corkscrew within a day or two of February 17.

Scientists have been using tiny transmitters and space satellites in an attempt to find out where they've been. It's a far cry from an early try at tracking John James Audubon used: tying silver cords to the legs of nestling phoebes and identifying two of them as adults when they returned to his Philadelphia neighborhood the next year. But he had no clue where they had been.

Today we spy on birds from space using tiny solar-powered transmitters weighing less than a penny that track species such as Swallow-tailed Kites on their previously unknown journeys.

Kite migration routes and destinations were unknown until 1996 when Ken Meyer of the Avian Research and Conservation Institute in Gainesville used six small transmitters on kites and tracked by satellite their 5,000-mile journey through Central America to southeastern Brazil.

Researchers now know that the kites from Southwest Florida fly south to a savannah very similar our habitat that borders the Brazilian Pantanal, a vast wetland, during its six-month rainy season (our dry season). There they join a resident population of Swallow-tailed Kites

Conservation was the reason for satellite tracking. "Finding out which areas are linked by a bird's migration gives us a powerful argument for conserving those habitats," wrote *Canadian Wildlife's* Guy Morrison.

"Kite habitat is threatened in both places [United States and Brazil] by large-scale agricultural development," said Meyer. "Saving



private ranch land in Florida and Brazil has to be the focus of our planning effort."

Corkscrew, Big Cypress, and the Fisheating Creek areas are the major breeding areas for kites in Florida, which harbors most of the North American population.

Kites are most conspicuous during the courtship and nest-building stages and while feeding young. Nests are made of small sticks, usually from cypress trees, and large amounts of Spanish moss and lichens. They are built mainly in the tallest pine and cypress trees that emerge above the canopy so that parents can approach unimpeded and drop to the nest.

"Despite their aerial prowess, kites don't maneuver well at low air speeds," said Meyer. "We suspect that's one reason why they build their nests in wind-exposed tree tops. Watch when an adult kite leaves the nest – it won't simply flap away."



A young kite peers out from its nest near the Ed Carlson bench (March 23, 2001).

Egg laying typically begins between mid March and mid April. The average clutch consists of two eggs, but the first chick hatched frequently kills the younger chick (obligate siblicide). Incubation lasts about 28 days, and the young fledge at five to six weeks of age.

Kites eat, drink, and bathe on the wing. Food is gleaned from tree tops and flying insects are taken and eaten in flight. The favored food is large flying insects such as dragonflies, but kites sometimes take nestlings and eggs of other birds, small lizards, and arboreal snakes. They also skim the tops of prairie grasses looking for grasshoppers. Drinking and bathing behavior is similar to swallows where the bird skims the surface of open water.

Large numbers of kites gather in post-breeding communal roosts before migrating to South America. The largest of these is around Fisheating Creek in Glades County but hundreds of kites also gather in Corkscrew.

Adults leave for the Brazilian wintering grounds in mid July and, arrive from early October to early November. Satellite tracking has revealed that juvenile kites, who leave as much as six weeks after the adults, travel at about twice the rate and arrive on the winter range soon after the adults.

Kite Notes

- The voice is a high-pitched *peet* repeated several times, or a high-pitched hissing whistle.
- Almost 85% of fledged kites do not survive the first year.
- Kites weigh 13-17 ounces, have a body length of about 24 inches, and have a wingspan of four feet.
- Kite feet are small and weak compared to those of other raptors.
- Good book: *Tracking Desire. A Journey After Swallow-tailed Kites* by Susan Cerulean

REFERENCE: Florida Breeding Bird Atlas (www.floridaconservation.org/bba/astk.htm)