

News from the Watershed

Swallow-tailed kite a welcome visitor to Highlands County

Have you noticed the scissor tailed, graceful birds of prey soaring on the air currents lately? Such a sight may instill a feeling of wonder – how does it feel to be so free and float along the atmosphere?

The American swallow-tailed kite is perhaps the most magnificent bird to observe. Not only its seemingly effortless and buoyant flight, but the attractiveness of the creature makes it a rare and fascinating sight. The kite's prominent tail is what separates it from other hawks. It has a forked tail and pointed wings. The head and under parts are white and the wings and tail are black. The bird is about the size of an osprey and has a body length of 19 to 26 inches with a four foot wing span.

The swallow-tail spends most of the day in flight. So much so that it eats a majority of its food while aloft. The kite's diet consists of various insects, lizards, snakes, frogs and even young nestlings. While hunting, kites drift just above the tree tops with outstretched wings and tail in constant motion as they balance on the air currents.

In addition to hunting and eating in flight, the birds also drink without landing. They skim over the water to drink and bathe.

Swallow-tailed kites nest in tall trees, preferably pines, due to limited maneuverability at low air speeds. They do not hover and require accessible nests exposed to wind. Other reasons they prefer to build in the highest tree tops is that the best support for their nests is located there and the height may save it from fire.

Generally, the female lays one to three creamy white eggs with bold dark brown spots. There is a 28-day incubation period and the male and female share in brooding and feeding their young.

These graceful hawks come from South America and begin to arrive in Florida in late February and early March. They will depart around August or September for wintering quarters. They are somewhat social and often times hunt in the same territory.

We are fortunate in Highlands County, that these graceful creatures build their nests here and visit this time of year. It is always a pleasure to see these beautiful birds soaring above the trees. It is amazing when we realize that these birds rarely touch the ground. They are almost constantly in flight, starting in the early morning and rarely perching until the evening.

They hunt, mate, drink and court while in flight. Very little energy is expended in the beating of wings as the kites appear to float effortlessly through the skies.

Do not deny yourself the experience of seeing these winged wonders in flight. Listen for the shrill squeals, whistles and soft twittering these creatures make. Watch for the activities they undertake while in the air; building their nests, courting each other, and hunting. Allow yourself to be hypnotized by their grace and beauty. After all swallow-tailed kites are among the most adept and acrobatic flyers of all raptors.