

A new migration route for Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus* in east Cuba

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Cotinga 18 (2002): 93–95

El Milano Tijereta *Elanoides forficatus* es un migrante parcial que habita desde el sureste de los EEUU hasta el norte de Argentina. Los milanos que anidan en partes occidentales del límite norte de su rango reproductivo en el sureste de los EEUU migran al sur a través de México y el centro de Centroamérica, hacia Sudamérica, mientras que aquellos que anidan en la península de Florida migran desde el extremo sudoeste de Florida, vía el Golfo de México y Cuba occidental, a la Península de Yucatán, antes de seguir por el corredor mesoamericano hasta Sudamérica. Se sabe poco acerca de la migración de esta especie en el resto de la cuenca del Caribe. Informamos sobre registros de *E. forficatus* alrededor de la ciudad de Santiago de Cuba, en el sudeste de Cuba, lo que sugiere que la especie es un migrante regular en esta parte de las Antillas Mayores. Nuestras observaciones incluyen movimientos hacia el este de 57 individuos el 27 de agosto y de diez individuos el 30 de agosto. Ambas observaciones fueron en las estribaciones sur de la Sierra Maestra, 10–30 km al este de Santiago de Cuba. En ambos casos, los milanos estaban migrando en compañía de Águilas Pescadoras *Pandion haliaetus*. Ambas observaciones sucedieron durante una prolongada pausa en la actividad de tormentas tropicales en la cuenca del Caribe, y creemos que reflejan movimientos a lo largo de un corredor migratorio para esta especie previamente no identificado. Sugerimos que lo más probable es que las aves que observamos estaban en ruta hacia áreas de invernada en el extremo oriental de Cuba, Jamaica o Hispaniola, para las cuales se requiere un cruce de aguas menor a 150 km.

Introduction

Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus* is a partial migrant²⁰ that occurs from the southern USA to northern Argentina^{7,12,23}. It is migratory in at least part of its range, not only outside of^{23,26} but also within the tropics^{13,16,19,30}. Migration is best understood in North America, particularly within the south USA^{23,32}, and, more recently, east Mexico³¹.

Swallow-tailed Kites, presumably those from western portions of their northernmost breeding grounds in the south-east USA, migrate along the Mesoamerican Land Corridor⁶ through east Mexico and, largely, the Caribbean slope of Central America,



Figure 1. View to the west from La Gran Piedra raptor migration watchsite, 22.5 km west of Santiago de Cuba city, south-east Cuba. La Gran Piedra, which is in the Sierra Maestra range, is the first raptor migration watchsite on the island (Keith L. Bildstein)

whereas those breeding in peninsular Florida stage at large (>1,300-bird) nocturnal roosts near Lake Okeechobee, south Florida²⁵, before departing for the west Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico, via the Gulf of Mexico and west Cuba^{6,23}. The former route has been confirmed by visual counts, both in Veracruz (Mexico)³¹, and Talamanca (Costa Rica)⁵; the latter by satellite telemetry of individual birds.

Passage through the rest of the Caribbean basin is poorly known. For example, Swallow-tailed Kite is thought to be accidental in the Bahamas¹², an uncommon transient and possibly rare winter resident in Cuba^{14,15}, and a vagrant in Jamaica²⁸, the Caymans⁹ and northern Bahamas². In addition, others have suggested that late July–early October observations in Trinidad^{4,21} refer to North American migrants²⁷. However, migrants, presumably from South America, breed in Trinidad in March–August, and the observations mentioned above may represent part of this population¹³. In late August 1999, two Swallow-tailed Kite were observed with 60 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* on the north edge of Gonaïves Bay in westernmost Haiti. Given the lack of earlier reports, Crouse & Keith¹¹ attributed this seemingly unusual location of Swallow-tailed Kites to strong north-west winds associated with Hurricane Dennis, which then was centred south-east of Cape Canaveral, Florida, in the Abaco Islands, Bahamas.

Here we report records of Swallow-tailed Kite around the city of Santiago de Cuba, south-east Cuba, which suggest the species is a regular migrant in this part of the Greater Antilles.

Methods and materials

Our observations were made while establishing the first raptor migration watchsite in Cuba, at La Gran Piedra in the Sierra Maestra of south-east Cuba, 22.5 km east of Santiago de Cuba city (Fig. 1). The watchsite is on a major migration corridor for Osprey travelling between breeding areas in eastern North America and wintering areas in South America²⁹. We spent portions or all of nine days in and around the city of Santiago de Cuba, on 27 August–6 September 2001. All observations were made using binoculars.

Results

Our first sighting was under 20% cloud-cover skies at 11h00, on 27 August, at Río Carpintero, 13 km east of Santiago de Cuba, on the road to La Gran Piedra. While scanning for migrating Ospreys, we located two Swallow-tailed Kites, circle-soaring together with an Osprey, c.300 m overhead. The three soared to c.400 m before gliding east toward a group of more-distant Swallow-tailed Kite, which then streamed east from a rising kettle of at least 55 individuals. The entire observation lasted c.90 seconds, during which time all of the birds flew out of sight to the east. Our second observation was on 29 August at Punta Gorda, on the east side of Santiago Bay, 4 km south-west of Santiago de Cuba. While scanning for migrants, we found a single east-bound Osprey at 09h10, and then a single Swallow-tailed Kite hunting insects at 09h15. The kite was in view for c.30 seconds, before it disappeared while stooping, presumably on an insect. Our third sighting was on 30 August, atop the 1234-m La Gran Piedra migration watchsite. We began counting raptors at 10h55. By 11h49 we had recorded 149 migrating Osprey, most of which were soaring and gliding along the south-facing slopes of this coastal mountain range, which stretches 250 km east–west, when a group of ten Swallow-tailed Kite appeared c.50 m above eye level, 300–500 m south of the watchsite. The eastbound kites glided within 10–100 m of each other toward Guantánamo Bay at c.50 kph, much like the more than 275 migrating Osprey we counted between 10h55 and 13h25. We saw no additional kites at the watchsite during counts of 3.0–4.5 hours on 1 and 3–5 September.

Discussion

Swallow-tailed Kite is known to aggregate, particularly on migration¹⁰, when flocks of up to 500 have been reported²⁷. Our observations of flocks of ten and more than 55 individuals travelling together in south-east Cuba, are consistent with such behaviour.

While Swallow-tailed Kite was once considered numerous in west Cuba^{3,18} and Bond⁸ suggested that North American breeders migrated to South America via Cuba and Jamaica, Meyer²³ noted no current basis for the statement that migrants oc-

cur regularly in the western Greater Antilles (i.e. Cuba and Jamaica)¹. On the other hand, he noted that the apparent lack of recent sightings is inconclusive as migrant Swallow-tailed Kites, flying high in small numbers, could easily go undetected²³.

Reports throughout much of eastern North America suggest that the species tends to wander considerably on spring migration²⁷, and the same is perhaps true in autumn. Even so, our observations during a prolonged lull in tropical storm activity in the Caribbean basin, together with those of Crouse & Keith¹¹, occurred near the peak of the species' migration through the Mesoamerican Land Corridor³². Given sporadic ornithological coverage in the region, it appears reasonable to suggest that considerable episodic, if not typical migratory movements of kites, occur through south-east Cuba.

The wintering areas of such migrants are uncertain. Considerable water-crossing ability is evident given both the species' occurrence as an accidental in Bermuda¹⁷, and its apparently regular southern Gulf of Mexico passage between peninsular Florida and east Yucatán, Mexico, via west Cuba³². Nevertheless, the species is characterised by Kerlinger²⁰ as one that flies only relatively short distances (i.e. <25 km) over water.

That individuals at pre-migration roosts in Florida were 24% heavier than breeding adults weighed in the south-east USA in April–May²⁵ supports suggestions that Swallow-tailed Kites accumulate considerable fat prior to migration²³. Even so, the species' ability to travel south from Cuba and Hispaniola across 600 km of the Caribbean to South America, as Osprey regularly does^{22,29}, is questionable, particularly as raptor migration watchsites in north Venezuela, the most likely arrival point (along with Colombia) for trans-Caribbean travellers²³, do not list Swallow-tailed Kite as even an irregular migrant³². Indeed, migration geography of the species' North American populations is poorly known in Venezuela²⁴. These points suggest that the birds we saw were probably en route to wintering areas in easternmost Cuba, Jamaica or Hispaniola, all of which require water crossings of less than 150 km.

Acknowledgements

The Wildlife Conservation Society helped fund the establishment of the La Gran Piedra watchsite and BIOECO (Centro Oriental de Ecosistemas y Biodiversidad), particularly its director, Nicasio Vina Davila, and its Subdirector, Miguel Angel Abad, offered logistical support during our work. This is Hawk Mountain Sanctuary research contribution 94.

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