

First records of Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii* for El Salvador and Honduras

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Durante marzo y abril de 2009, se registraron los primeros individuos de *Gampsonyx swainsonii* para El Salvador y Honduras. Se sugiere que la población conocida en el occidente de Nicaragua podría estar expandiéndose hacia el norte.

An immature Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii* was photographed at Playa El Icacal, Intipucá, dpto. La Unión, El Salvador (13°10'N 88°00'W), on 1 March 2009 (Fig. 1). In the nearby Honduran department of Choluteca, a Pearl Kite (of unknown age) was photographed near Choluteca, on 22 April 2009 (Fig. 2). These are first records for El Salvador⁹ and Honduras³ respectively.

The El Salvador bird was first seen in flight, crossing a dirt road parallel to the beach at



Figure 1. Juvenile Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii*, Playa El Icacal, Intipucá, dpto. La Unión, El Salvador, 1 March 2009 (John van Dort)



Figure 2. Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii*, Choluteca, Honduras, 22 April 2009 (Mario Espinal)

El Icacal, before landing in an *Acacia hindsii* (Fabaceae) shrub, c.4 m tall, and part of a live fence separating two closely grazed and recently burnt, short-grass pastures, each of 2.5 ha and bordered to the south by a 120-m wide strip of dry forest and to the north by mangrove associated with the Las Tunas estuary. More pastures stretched to the east for several hundred metres and to the west for several kilometres. The kite was observed by OK, JvD, RJ, L. Girón and M. Rodríguez. Rufous fringing to the mantle feathers indicated the bird was a juvenile¹².

The Honduras bird was photographed perched in a *Calycophyllum candidissimum* (Rubiaceae) tree by ME, in a similarly open situation c.4 km south-west of Choluteca (13°16'N 87°13'W), which is c.85 km east of the El Salvador sighting (Fig. 3). Notable differences in the coloration of the forehead and cheeks between the birds in the two photographs



Figure 3. Pearl Kite *Gampsonyx swainsonii* records in the Gulf of Fonseca region in 2008–09 mentioned in the text. (Nicaragua records from 2008 are presumed to represent the resident, western Nicaraguan population.) Map by Vladlen Henriquez.

suggest they were different individuals. Given a seven-week timeframe between the Honduran and Salvadoran sightings, however, a plumage change is still possible.

Since the first country sightings, the species has been seen again at Choluteca, on 30 October, 6 November and 18 November 2009, and on 10 February 2010 (ME). It has not been seen again in El Salvador, despite a full-day search of Playa El Icacal on 13 January 2010.

Pearl Kite, a species found over much of tropical South America at low densities, is currently considered not threatened^{1,2,6}. It appears to be slowly expanding its range north in Central America, presumably because of deforestation and creation of cattle pastures; open areas are its preferred habitat¹². Following the colonisation of Nicaragua, where it was considered common nearly a century ago^{5,11}, Panama's first record followed in 1977¹². The first Costa Rican sighting apparently was in 1996, when two birds appeared to be nesting at San Isidro de El General in the south Pacific interior (J. Zook pers. comm.). Since then, the species has been reported elsewhere in Costa Rica, including Guanacaste province, where it was first observed in 2002, and more recently in the Central Valley (2007) and southern Caribbean lowlands (J. Zook pers. comm.).

On 4 April 2008, OK & R. Bjork noted that in Nicaragua the species reaches north to the very tip of the Cosigüina Peninsula⁸ (Fig. 3). They observed kites at two sites along the shore, 42 km south-east of the El Salvador sighting and 42 km south-west of the first Honduras sighting. One of these lies directly opposite dpto. La Unión, El Salvador, across the Gulf of Fonseca.

The El Salvador and Honduras sightings might be of vagrants, but their close spatial and temporal proximity suggest range expansion from Nicaragua into southern Honduras and eastern El Salvador. Given the relatively close proximity of the Honduran sightings, they may pertain to a single individual. Unfortunately, few birders visit the open lowlands of eastern El Salvador and southern Honduras⁷ making it possible that Pearl Kite has been present in this area for some time. Nonetheless, an ornithological survey at Playa Icacal, involving 15 days of observations in April–June 2008⁴ did not detect the species, nor did 18 days of surveys in southern Honduras in 2002–06⁷. Expansion into southern Honduras was predicted over 25 years ago¹⁰.

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