

Look Up, There's A New Bird In Town

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you spend much time outside in Junction City, in the summertime, you may have noticed a new bird flying around the past few summers. The bird is a bird of prey that is known as the Mississippi Kite. It's not a big bird of prey. They are about 14 inches long, have a wingspan of around 30 inches and weigh in at 10 ounces. So don't worry, they aren't going to carry off your cat or your small dog.

These are aerial specialists. Their preferred food source is large flying insects - think katydids, grasshoppers, cicadas and dragonflies. But they will also take small birds, snakes, lizards and small mammals. They'll gather into loose groups and head south by early September but now you'll see them soaring overhead anytime of the day. They are distinctly gray, the wings have a very tapered look and the tail often looks very square shaped. They'll circle around, dive quickly and all of a sudden disappear into a tree. They are incredibly graceful fliers.

Sixty years ago, Mississippi Kites weren't known in Kansas. As their name implies they were a regular species in Mississippi and throughout the Gulf coast. But then for whatever reason, they started expanding their range to the west and north. They first showed up in Kansas in the south central and southwestern part of the state. Ever since they have been expanding north and east across the state.

Like many birds of prey, once the breeding season is over and the young have fledged, the kites will often disperse and wander further than where they were nesting. In the mid to late 1990s, kites were being seen just southwest of Junction City or in the southwest part of Junction City. These were probably birds that had nested in Abilene. About ten years ago we started seeing kites throughout the summer in Junction City and about five years ago, we finally found the first kite nest, in Junction City, in the Playground Park area.

From that first confirmed nest, and probably many other undiscovered nests, the population of kites in Junction City has exploded. I suspect that there may easily be 40 or 50 nesting pairs in Junction City. Three years ago the first ones were seen in Manhattan, and this year Manhattan has had their first confirmed nesting pair. And their northeasterly march across the state continues!

Mississippi Kites winter in South America. They head north in March and get to Kansas in late April. I expect to see the first kites in the air over Junction City the last week of April. They'll spend several weeks exploring the area and picking out mates and nesting areas. They nest in a variety of trees, often towards the very top but deep enough into the foliage and branches that the nest isn't easily seen. The nest is a fairly crude platform of twigs which may be reused from one year to the next.

Peak egg laying occurs in late May to early June and after 30 days the one or two eggs hatch. It takes about another four to five weeks for young kites to grow large enough to fly. We had a nest across the street from the Extension Office for several years. It was fascinating to watch the young to grow so quickly. By late July most young in our area have fledged (taken their first flights).

A few late nesting kites may not have fledged until early August but by mid August the adults and the young can be seen flying all over town. In late August they'll gather into loose groups and by mid September they are gone, flying south to the Gulf and then along the coast into Mexico, through Central America and into South America for the winter.

As we move on through the month of August take time to look out over the city and look for these graceful gray birds. They are fun to watch and their remaining days this season are limited. But don't worry, after they're gone, it'll be just a few months until they are back soaring over the city again!