

**ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

**Animal Abstract**

**Element Code:** ABNKCC09010

**Data Sensitivity:**       No      

**CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE**

**NAME:** *Ictinia mississippiensis*

**COMMON NAME:** Mississippi Kite, Mosquito Hawk, Blue-snake Hawk, Hovering Kite,  
Locust-eater, Blue Kite, Louisiana Kite

**SYNONYMS:** *Falco misissippiensis*

**FAMILY:** Accipitridae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** *Falco misissippiensis*, Wilson, Amer. Orn., vol3,  
1811, p.80, pl. 25, fig 1.

**TYPE LOCALITY:** A few miles below Natchez, Mississippi.

**TYPE SPECIMEN:**

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** *Ictinia mississippiensis* is one of two species in *Ictinia*. *I. plumbea* is the plumbeous kite of the neotropics. According to AOU 1983 (*in NatureServe* 2003), some authors consider *Ictinia mississippiensis* conspecific with *I. plumbea*.

**DESCRIPTION:** A medium-sized raptor with long pointed wings; the first primary is distinctly shorter. Length 33.0-43.2 cm (13.0-17.0 in.); wingspan 86.4-94.0 cm (34.0-37.0 in); Glinski (1998) reports a smaller wingspan of 74-84 cm (29-33 in). Females are larger than males weighing 276.4-340.2 g (9.75-12.0 oz); males weigh 212.6-269.3 g (7.5-9.5 oz). Weights may be higher in other parts of their range. The head, throat, nape, breast, abdomen, flanks, and wing-linings are light to medium gray. The back and upperwing coverts are darker gray to near black. Scapulars and other back-feathers rarely show variable white spots. The flight feathers are black except for the secondaries, which are dorsally pale gray to silvery white. Many adults show variable patches of brownish red on the primaries. The tail is uniformly black; the tip generally squarish to slightly notched. The beak, cere, lores, and narrow circle of feathers around the eye, are black. The iris is scarlet. Stout feet are pale to dark yellow to orange-yellow, with gray or black areas. Sexes are similar, but the head and nape of the male is usually paler than the female. Identification of sexes in the field using size, shading of head and nape, and rectrices jointly is reliable (Glinski 1998; Parker 1999).

Plumage of juveniles is very different compared to adults (adult plumage obtained by fall of second calendar year), and resembles a slim *Buteo*. The head, neck, and ventral body surface to undertail-coverts is white or pale buff, streaked heavily with brown, rufous, and gray. The wings and upper body are dull black, while the feathers are edged narrowly with white to brown. Variable areas of white on the dorsal body-feathers may show. The wing-linings are barred or mottled brown, dark gray, and white. The tail has large white spots on inner webs,

merging into two or three white bands. Wings appear more rounded than adults in flight. (Parker 1999).

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** Black tail and lack of hovering (glides and banks instead) readily distinguishes *Ictinia mississippiensis* from other raptors including *Elanus leucurus* (White-tailed Kite), which has white under parts and a mostly white tail. Kites are somewhat similar in shape to falcons but note the different head patterns. At a distance a Northern Harrier can look similar, but it's under wings are paler and broader and it has a white rump.

**ILLUSTRATIONS:**

B&W line drawings (Robbins et al. 1983:68)  
B&W line drawings (Scott 1987:186)  
Color drawing & photos (Clark 1987)  
Color drawing (R. Sloan in Glinski 1998: Pl. 6)  
Color drawing (Sibley 2000)  
Color photo of egg (Baicich 1997, Pl. 28)

**TOTAL RANGE:** Breeding resident in North America, non-nesting seasons in South America. In the United States, they range from the Gulf States to Nebraska and Wisconsin, west to Colorado and Arizona. During the winter, they range as far south as Paraguay and Argentina. A casual visitor to California, Nevada and Utah.

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** They have been observed in Cochise, Maricopa, and Pinal counties, with one general sighting for Yavapai County in the vicinity of Camp Verde. Glinski and Gennaro (1988), reported observations along the San Pedro River and Gila River near Kearney, Verde River near Cottonwood, and below Bartlett Lake.

**SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS**

**BIOLOGY:** Gregarious bird, several perch in same tree even when nesting; they do not maintain territories. Forages or perches alone and in small to large flocks. They sometimes soar so high that they disappear from sight, and then dive at amazing speeds performing somersaults and other acrobatics. Usually a silent bird but uses whistled alarm call (punctuated two-note *pi' chewww*) when intruder is near nest. They also use an Osprey-like double whistle.

**REPRODUCTION:** Nest preparation begins in early to mid-May, but birds may build or add to old nests during June and early July. There is little courtship as these birds are already paired (monogamous) when they arrive at the breeding grounds. They often nest near bees or wasps as these insects may ward off botflies that feed upon their young. A number of pairs may nest in a loose colony. Nests built in a fork or crotch of a tree, high up where possible, but low in scrub oaks; usually 30-135 ft (9-41 m) up. The nest is a variable twig structure from small flimsy platforms to compact structures; usually irregular or oval shaped. In western part of their range, flat, flimsy stick nest lined with fresh green leaves in fork or on limbs of scattered

trees of grasslands or in cottonwoods along creeks. The nests are a shallow cup 14x11 inches and 5 inches deep. Clutch size is 1-3(2), with eggs laid from March to June. They are bluish-white short elliptical to short sub-elliptical shaped, and are smooth and non-glossy; 4.3x3.4 cm. Both adults perform incubation for 31-32 days. Each bird usually feeds itself when it is not incubating the eggs.

The young are attended by both parents and climb out of the nest to adjacent branches at 15-18 days. The young can fly at 34 days but rely on adults for several weeks thereafter. Hatchlings are white and downy with a black eye ring and lores. Their beak is blackish and the cere and rictus vivid to pale yellow. The eye is dark brown and the legs are usually orange-yellow. Yearlings may breed or help at the nest. Nest failures are most often due to predation by snakes, fox squirrels, raccoons and sometimes crows and Great Horned Owls.

**FOOD HABITS:** Mississippi Kites forage upon large insects caught in flight, and by hawking from tree perches. However, depending on local populations they will also consume small birds, small mammals (bats and rodents such as mice), small reptiles, and amphibians. They do sometimes resort to other foods, occasionally scavenging road-killed vertebrates. Kites frequently soar for prey in the presence of many other kites, but hawk alone. They usually forage within 0.5 km of nest but sometimes up to several kilometers. Fledged young are fed on the wing.

In Arizona, Apache cicadas are their main prey item, with a sprinkling of small mammals and birds (Glinski 1998). According to Glinski and Gennaro 1988, "cicadas are an important prey in major range expansion areas of Arizona".

**HABITAT:** Tall forest, open woodland, prairie, semiarid rangeland, shelterbelts, wooded areas bordering lakes and streams in more open regions, scrubby oaks and mesquite, and lowland/floodplain forests. Requires open areas near nesting sites for foraging. Breeding habitat in Arizona consists of riparian deciduous forests that border desertscrub upland habitats. Manmade habitat in central Arizona consists of pecan orchards. (Glinski and Gennaro 1988).

**ELEVATION:** 1,400-3,040 ft (427-927m).

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Riparian deciduous forests

**POPULATION TRENDS:** Populations found in New Mexico, Arizona, and most of what is now extreme west and southwest Texas, were nonexistent or unknown before 1955 (New Mexico; Hubbard 1978) and 1971 (Arizona; Monson and Phillips 1981) (Parker 1999). "Presently expanding breeding range in North America, including major recent extensions in the Southwest since 1950" (Glinski and Gennaro 1988). Because it prefers to forage over open and edge habitats, agricultural expansion and forest removal in Central and South America may increase foraging habitat and prey populations there, as has happened in North America.

**SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION**

**ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS:** None

**STATE STATUS:** 2 (AZGFD, AWCS 2022)  
[1B (AGFD SWAP 2012)]  
[WSC (AGFD, WSCA 1996 in prep)]  
[Candidate (AGFD, TNW 1988)]

**OTHER STATUS:** Not BLM Sensitive (USDI, BLM AZ 2010)  
[Bureau of Land Management Sensitive  
(USDI, BLM AZ 2008)]  
Category A (Secretaría de Medio ambiente  
2000)  
[Category A (Diario oficial de la federacion,  
1994)]

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** Degradation of riparian nesting habitat is a main factor for this species. In addition, pesticides and persecution by humans are other factors affecting this species.

**PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:**

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:** “Protect nesting habitat by identifying critical riparian forests and upland shelterbelts and savannas, and by negotiating habitat management alternatives with landowners. Develop kite observation areas that afford good views of kite habitat... providing general public with an educational experience that stresses habitat protection and raptor conservation” (Glinski and Gennaro 1988). Biological studies (reproductive, foraging, dispersal, social interactions etc.) are needed for this species.

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP:** BIA - Fort McDowell Reservation; BLM - Tucson Field Office; State Land Department; TNC - Dudleyville-Cooks Lake Preserve; Private.

**SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION****REFERENCES:**

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

The scientific name comes from *iktinos* the Greek word for a kite, and the Latinized name for Mississippi, where the first scientific specimen was collected.

Attacks on humans by dive-bombing kites in urban areas near their nesting sites, have earned this bird a reputation of being aggressive, and thus are sometimes unwelcome guests, and on occasion must be removed from the area.

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