



White-tailed Kite Photos by Gary Meredith and DeeDee Gollwitzer

Sea and Sage Audubon is now conducting a survey of White-tailed Kite nesting territories in Orange County. We are looking for any and all information about the location of kite nests, or nesting activities, within the county and will appreciate any information, from as little as single nest sightings, to regular observations at a territory. Pertinent information needed includes: the location, date, how many birds observed, and any behavioral information. Please remember that while we need information, it is very important to stay far away from an active nest and to avoid any disturbance in the nest area. A copy of the White-tailed Kite observation form can be obtained by clicking [here](#).

### **White-tailed Kites (*Elanus leucurus*) in Orange County**

Not that very long ago, White-tailed Kites were considered a common species in Orange County. In fact, in the 1970's, communal roosts of over 100 individuals were regularly seen in the San Joaquin Marsh.

Well into the 90's, roosts of 75 or more kites were found in places like the Arroyo Trabuco in southern Orange County. You may even remember the nickname "Freeway Hawks", given to these birds, because they were so commonly seen foraging along our freeway ramps and grass covered center dividers. Now, however, they have become much less abundant and successful nesting pairs appear to be few and far between.

We estimate that about 75 to 100 pairs nested within Orange County as late as the 1980's. Now, we estimate there may only 15 to 20 pairs nesting in good years, perhaps even fewer in poor years.

White-tailed Kite populations are naturally cyclical, following population swings of their primary prey: California voles, gophers and mice. Extended droughts and warmer temperatures may be wreaking havoc with small mammal populations, thereby having some impact of kite populations and breeding success. More needs to be learned.

Habitat loss and habitat conversion have also taken a heavy toll on kites throughout southern California. They need open grasslands for foraging and a level of seclusion for successful nesting and the fledging of youngsters. Unfortunately, there is little undisturbed open space or grasslands left in Orange County.

Perhaps in part due to changes in landscapes and declining prey availability, we find that the few pairs that continue to nest in the county regularly, do so in or near urban habitats, perhaps finding better prey resources near irrigated slopes and greenbelts. Unfortunately, the close proximity to human activity comes at a price. Each year the Orange County Bird of Prey Center, and other wildlife rescue facilities in the area, receive injured or very ill fledgling kites, usually the result of human interactions such as, car strikes, attacks by crows and ravens, or starvation due to habitat and territory fragmentation.

Each year the Raptor Research Committee tries to take a census of the White-tailed Kites nesting in Orange County. We record nests and success and store the data for future reference. You can help with this

effort by reporting all observation of kites, especially breeding pairs and active nests.

White-tailed Kite Observation Form

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