

**Everglade snail kite***Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*

Federal Status – ENDANGERED

State Status - ENDANGERED

**Identification**

Snail kites are similar in size to red shouldered hawks. All snail kites have deep red eyes and a white rump patch similar to the northern harrier. Snail kites have a shorter, broader tail, and broader, more rounded wings than a harrier. Males are slate gray, and females and juveniles vary in amounts of white, light brown, and dark brown, but the females always have white on their chin. Kites vocalize mainly during courtship and nesting. Both adults make a croaking call: “ka ka ka” or a variation on this pattern. Young birds make a screeching noise.

In flight, kites have slow wing beats similar in speed to a great blue heron. When gliding over the water, the wing profile forms a straight line from wing to wing, with the tips of each wing pointing downward. Kites usually look downward during flight, and scan from side to side looking for prey. Kites regularly perch, both while hunting and to rest. They may perch at many different heights, from the ground to high up in trees. When kites dive down to catch a prey item, their wings beat faster, and only their feet touch the water during the capture.

Distribution

Snail kites may occur in nearly all of the wetlands of central and southern Florida. They regularly occur in lake shallows along the shores and islands of many major lakes, including Lakes Okeechobee, Kissimmee, Tohopekaliga (Toho) and East Toho. They also regularly occur in the expansive marshes of southern Florida such as Water Conservation Areas 1, 2, and 3, Everglades National Park, the upper St. John’s River marshes, and Grassy Waters Preserve.

Movements

Everglade snail kites are highly mobile, and may travel through most of the south Florida wetland systems during their lifetime, and they can and will move from wetland to wetland throughout their range in Florida. Kites will generally stay in one area as long as they can find food (apple snails), but will seek another wetland that has food available if foraging conditions decline. For example, when drought conditions occurred in most of southern Florida during 2001, nearly all of the nesting effort occurred in the Upper Kissimmee River basin.

Nesting

Kites nest primarily from January through July, though they can nest nearly year-round. They may nest more than once per year, and produce 1-3 chicks per nest. From the time that they begin nest-building, it takes approximately 80-90 days (three months) for them to hatch and fledge young. During this time, they are closely tied to the nest site, and are particularly vulnerable to disturbance and habitat impacts.

Diet

The snail kites are unique among raptors in Florida in that they rely almost entirely on apple snails for food. This reliance on apple snails makes managing for apple snails an important part of managing for snail kites.

Habitat

The key to managing Everglade snail kites is maintaining suitable habitat. This includes both nesting and foraging habitat. Kite foraging habitat consists of relatively shallow wetland vegetation, either within extensive marsh systems, or in lake littoral zones. Emergent vegetation, including spike rushes, maidencane, and bulrushes, are important components of habitat because they allow apple snails to occupy the area. Dense, thick vegetation is not optimal for snail kite foraging because kites can not readily see apple snails to capture them, and if vegetation is too sparse, apple snails may not be able to survive or reproduce. Kites nest in a variety of vegetation types, including both woody vegetation such as willows, cypress, pond apple, and even exotic invasive species such as melaleuca. Kites usually nest over open water, and this helps protect nests from mammalian predators such as raccoons. Nests can be very well hidden, or quite obvious. The height of a nest is usually about 1-3 meters above the water (about the height of the top of an airboat cage). Kites almost always nest in areas with good foraging habitat nearby, and most foraging occurs in marshes immediately surrounding the nest.

Protecting kites

Any disturbance to snail kites or their nests, including flushing perched birds, interrupting foraging, flushing adults from nest sites, interfering with feeding and protecting nestling kites, and impacting vegetation that supports kite nests is prohibited by Federal and State laws. If you see snail kites, we recommend that you avoid the immediate area where kites are present. If in doubt about whether an activity may affect kites, please contact a USFWS or FWC office, or contact the office listed below.

For More Information about Everglade snail kites:

Everglade snail kite recovery plan: <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/vbpdfs/species/birds/snki.pdf>

South Florida Ecological Services Office: <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach>

Threatened and Endangered species information: <http://www.fws.gov/everglades/wildlife.html>

To report snail kite nest locations, or for questions about activities that might affect Everglade snail kites, please contact:

Tylan Dean
Fish and Wildlife Biologist
South Florida Ecological Services Office
1339 20th Street, Vero Beach, Florida 32960-3559
Telephone – (772) 562-3909, extension 284
E-mail – Tylan_Dean@fws.gov