



Snail Kite by Mike Tracy

The endangered Snail Kite is in serious trouble. The species, formerly known as the Everglades Kite and whose entire U.S. population is found in Florida, has lost most of its habitat and its traditional food, native apple snails. As a result, its range and numbers are dropping dramatically. Known for its aerial grace and dramatic plumage, the Kite is on course to be extirpated from Florida if current trends continue.

Two broad problems appear to be plaguing the Kite. In the Kissimmee Valley region, what habitat remains has been invaded by exotic aquatic plant and snail species. In Okeechobee and the southern Everglades, development, water management and extreme weather have degraded the natural habitats and availability of food so dramatically that Kite nesting has failed throughout these regions.

Subsequently, remaining Kites have tried to adjust by relocating most of their nesting efforts to the Kissimmee Valley and feeding heavily on non-native apple snails, a food source that lives and feeds on aquatic plants, including the exotic hydrilla. The habitat of hydrilla and exotic snails may be foreign to Florida, but Kites use it much like a community of native plants and snails.

Reversing Current Trends

Difficult aquatic plant management choices and tradeoffs are necessary to provide Kites with some minimal habitat and food source. Generally, Audubon supports efforts to suppress exotics and restore native plant and animal communities. However, no methods presently exist to eradicate exotic hydrilla or the snails it supports, nor to restore native plant communities and native apple snails to sustain Kites. Thus, the usual tactic of eliminating these exotic communities using herbicides—specifically in lakes such as Lake Tohopekaliga—now could undermine the Kite's most important remaining habitat, food, and nesting areas.

Until restoration efforts can successfully restore native habitat and improve water management in Lake Okeechobee and the southern Everglades, managing the few areas in its northern range to sustain enough hydrilla to meet Kite needs can act as an important bridge to secure the species' survival. Therefore, Audubon believes that aquatic plant management, for now, should sustain enough hydrilla to meet Kite needs, while maintaining other essential functions of the lake, including navigation, fishing, and flood control to the extent practicable.



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Snail Kites Range and Numbers

The Snail Kite's range in the United States is contained entirely in Florida. Historically, the species could be found as far north as the Florida panhandle, Paynes Prairie near Gainesville and Jacksonville on the St. Johns River, to the Miami River in the south.

Northern regions and many peripheral areas no longer host Snail Kites and their range has decreased to inhabiting the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, with smaller populations in the Kissimmee Valley and southern parts of the St. Johns River marshes. Over the past decade, Okeechobee and Everglades habitats have been severely degraded by droughts and floods, leaving most remaining Kite nesting effort dependent on non-native plant and exotic snail communities in northern areas, such as Lake Tohopekaliga.

In the past 10 years, Kite numbers also have plummeted dramatically, from more than 3,000 in the mid 1990s to less than 700 now (Figure. 1).

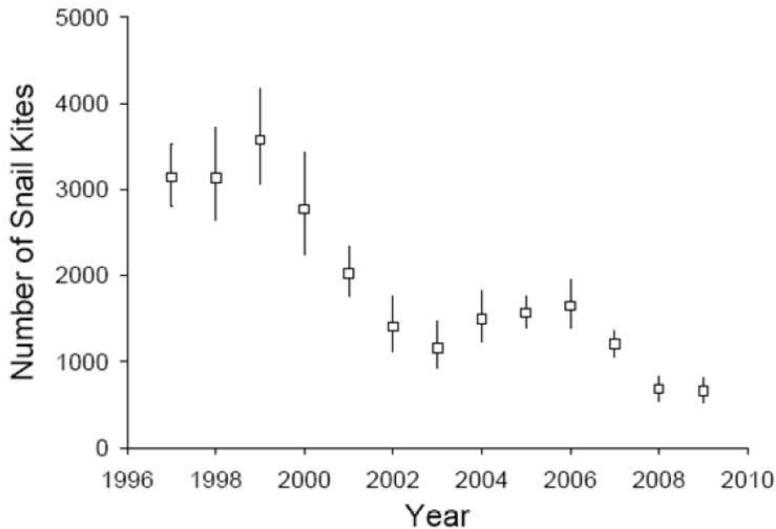


FIGURE 2-9 Annual estimates of snail kite population size in Florida and 95 percent confidence intervals
SOURCE: Cattau et al. (2008, 2009).

Figure 1. Kite populations have plummeted in Florida and it is calculated that if these trends continue, Kites could be extirpated from the state in as little as 30 years.

Footnotes:

¹ Sykes, P. W., Jr., J. A. Rodgers, Jr., R. E. Bennetts. 1995. Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 171 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.) The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and The American Ornithologists Union, Washington, D. C.

² Christopher Cattau, C., W Kitchens, B Reichert, J. Olbert, K. Pias, J. Martin, and C. Zweig. 2009. Snail Kite Demography Annual Report. 2009 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Contract # W912EP-09-C-0023. Jacksonville, FL.