

Status and Occurrence of White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) is an elegant raptor that is found on the West Coast of North America as a breeding species from California, Oregon and recently in southwestern Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). It is a common breeder in southern Texas with a small breeding population established in southern Florida (since at least 1986 in western Broward and south Dade County), and scattered reports elsewhere along the peninsula and in the eastern panhandle (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). The last historical nest found in Florida was in 1910, but the population has slowly increased since the 1960s (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). It is unclear if the current breeding population was derived from a former population or derived from birds that moved east from western states (Dunk 1995). In Mexico, the White-tailed Kite breeds southward from the southern Sonora along the coast through Jalisco and central Michoacán (Dunk 1995). It is also found along the west coast from central Guerrero, south through Chiapas and into Guatemala; from central Chihuahua south through eastern Durango to Querétaro; from Tamaulipas south along the east coast to Campeche (Howell and Webb 2010). It also breeds in the north eastern region of Baja California Norte (Howell and Webb 2010). In recent years, the White-tailed Kite has been recorded increasingly as a year-round resident throughout the western Baja California Sur, except for the southern Cape region (Rodriguez-Estrella *et al.* 1995). In Mexico, the White-tailed Kite is not found in pine-oak forests and desert habitats (Dunk 1995). It breeds along both coasts of Guatemala and along coastal El Salvador and Honduras (Monroe 1968, Howell and Webb 2010), as well as throughout the lowlands of Costa Rica (Stiles and Skutch 1989); in Panama on the Pacific slope from Chiriquí to Eastern Panama Province (rarely to Darién province), and on the Caribbean slope where it is recorded mainly from the Canal area and Colón Province (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989).

The White-tailed Kite also breeds throughout South America; in Colombia from the Cauca Valley and eastern llanos, east through Venezuela and Guyana to Surinam; central and eastern Brazil, south to Paraguay, Uruguay, and northern Argentina, south to Mendoza and Buenos Aires (Dunk 1995). It is also found in Chile from Atacama to Valdivia (Dunk 1995). It is considered casual in Trinidad (Blake 1977).

Sightings of breeding kites have increased throughout the western and southwestern United States (Gatz *et al.* 1988), but there are no sizable populations in these areas. The species is a very rare summer resident in south eastern Oklahoma and is a casual visitor in the northeast, south-central, and the southwest regions of the state (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992).

There have been recent breeding attempts in Arizona, Louisiana, and Mississippi (Palmer 1988). The White-tailed Kite is recorded casually during the spring and summer in many states north to Idaho, Wyoming, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, and east to New York and Massachusetts (Palmer 1988).

In Canada, all records are from British Columbia with 43 records mostly from the coastal regions, but a recent wave of photo-documented records from the interior of the Province are exceptional and intriguing (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1).

Although resident throughout most of its breeding range, the White-tailed Kite disperses during the nonbreeding season, resulting in some range expansion in winter months. In California, the White-tailed Kite is observed sporadically throughout most of the state in the winter (Small 1994). The species is a very uncommon to fairly common winter visitor in late August through April to western Oregon, particularly along the coast and in the interior valleys of the Rogue, Umpqua, Willamette Valleys, but is rare east of the Cascades Mountains (Henny and Annear 1978, Gilligan *et al.* 1994). The White-tailed Kite was a rare winter visitor to the western edge of the Great Basin during the 1970s, and was observed near Reno, and the Pyramid and Honey Lake areas of Nevada, but recent records are lacking from this area (Ryser 1985).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the White-tailed Kite is fairly straight-forward and is covered in all standard North American field guides. The White-tailed Kite in flight is unique looking as it can combine the look of a raptor with that of a small gull and a harrier. In all ages the White-tailed Kite always shows a black bill with a red gape (Pickwell 1930). The legs and feet are yellow in all ages as well (Dunk 1995). The following breakdown of identification of the different ages of the White-tailed Kite is taken from (Dunk) 1995.

The White-tailed Kite in juvenile plumage has a mostly white head, forehead, and chin; the remainder of the head is mostly buffy tan, grading into dark gray on the nape. The back is brownish with some darker feathers. Some smaller feathers have tawny-coloured edges while others have white distal margins. The lesser and median coverts are nearly black, though the longest ones are white-tipped; the greater coverts are dark gray with white ends; the primary coverts are blue-gray in colour with white ends; the colour of the primaries is the same with the tips of the feathers narrowly margined white; the secondaries are like greater coverts; the wing lining is white with a dark spot and the axillaries are white. The underparts are primarily white, with a tawny band on the upper breast area. The tail is medium gray with a darker gray subterminal band approximately 5 mm wide. The eye colour of birds at this age is brown.

Palmer (1988) describes the acquisition of basic 1 plumage occurring in birds that are between 3.5–6 months of age with some birds taking longer. The Prebasic I molt begins on the head, and then later on the mantle. The juvenile remiges and rectrices are retained on birds in this plumage. In appearance, this plumage is similar to birds that are in definitive basic plumage. The eye colour changes at about 6 months of age from brown to red (Palmer 1988)

Definitive Prebasic molt is completed over a prolonged period in summer and fall, and can even occur later in the year. The primaries feathers are renewed from innermost feathers out towards the outermost feathers. At this age the forehead is grayish white and the remainder of the upper parts is a neutral gray colour. The neutral gray colouration becomes a pale gray on central rectrices and the tail is a dull white colour. The primaries are a deep neutral gray that can be somewhat brownish-coloured on the inner webs of the feathers. The lesser and median wing-coverts are dull black. The remainder of the upper surface of the wing is black. The sides of the head are white with a blackish spot in front of the eye. The lining of the wing is white except for a single conspicuous spot that is a deep neutral gray colour. The underparts are pure white. The central pair of rectrices is a variable whitish-gray colour, and the remaining rectrices are a white-tinged gray colour. The eyes at this age are red.

Occurrence and Documentation

The White-tailed Kite is a recent addition to the British Columbia checklist with the first confirmed sighting coming from the Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary on April 26, 1990 (Smith and Ireland 1992, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Since that first observation, this species is recorded almost annually in the Lower Mainland with records occurring every two to three years in a five year period. There are now 9 records for Vancouver Island and very recent photographed records for the interior region of the Province. These records fit well with the species rapid expansion northward along the coast from Oregon into Washington State throughout the 1970-1990s. The best period to look for the White-tailed Kite in British Columbia, based on current records, is from April to June with the peak period of occurrences in the third week of April (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 & 2). The White-tailed Kite is a species that prefers open agricultural areas that contains suitable trees or snags on which they perch. The first reported observations of the White-tailed Kite in Washington State were in Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge on July 10, 1975 (Harrington-Tweit 1980). By 1985, there were a few mated pairs of the White-tailed Kite in the Grays Harbour region (Anderson and Batchelder 1990). The breeding record for the State was found near the town of Raymond in 1988 (Anderson and Batchelder 1990). Since that time, the White-tailed Kite has slowly pushed its breeding range in Washington, north to Thurston County and is now a resident found year round in the State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). As the species slowly pushes north towards British Columbia, it is highly possible that a nesting pair of White-tailed Kites could be found in the

Lower Mainland or in the Fraser Valley in the coming decades. Given the frequency of records over the past decade, the White-tailed Kite should be looked for by observers every year in southwestern British Columbia. As with all rare bird species, all occurrences should be photographed and properly documented.



Figure 1: Record # 16: An adult White-tailed Kite found at the old “Cora Brown” Subdivision on Sea Island on April 18, 1999. 1st Photo record for Canada. Photo © Evelyn Whiteside.



Figure 2: Record # 16: An adult White-tailed Kite found at the old “Cora Brown” Subdivision on Sea Island on April 18, 1999. 1st Photo record for Canada. Photo © Evelyn Whiteside.



Figures 2 & 3: Record # 25: An adult White-tailed Kite in Pitt Meadows on April 18, 2003.
Photo © Walter Ammann.



Figures 4 & 5: Record # 33: An adult White-tailed Kite in the Sardis Area of Chilliwack on April 17, 2011. Photos © Rick Toochin



Figure 6: Record # 39: White-tailed Kite adult near Williams Lake on May 18, 2014.
Photo © Phil Ranson.



Figures 7 & 8: Record # 39: White-tailed Kite adult near Williams Lake on May 18, 2014.
Photos © Brian Murland.

Table 1: Records of White-tailed Kite for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult April 26, 1990: John Ireland, David Smith: RMBS, Ladner (Smith and Ireland 1992)
- 2.(1) adult June 5, 1990: Rick Toochin: Alex Fraser Bridge Base: Delta (Toochin 1996)
- 3.(1) sub-adult June 7, 1990: John Luce, Danny Tyson, CH, mobs: Rannie Rd., Pitt Meadows (Dorsey 1996, Toochin 1996)
- 4.(1) adult March 9, 1992: Rick Toochin: Highway 99 and Steveston Hwy Interchange, Richmond (Toochin 2012a)
- 5.(1) adult April 21, 1992: Barbara Begg: Victoria International Airport, North Saanich (Bowling 1992, Toochin 1996)
- 6.(1) adult April 26, 1992: David Allinson: Triangle Mountain, Colwood (Bowling 1992, Davidson 1993, Toochin 1996)
- 7.(1) adult May 2, 1992: Elizabeth J. Brooks: Miracle Beach, Black Creek (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 8.(1) adult September 23, 1992: Derrick Marven: Maple Bay Road, Duncan (Bain and Holder 1992, Toochin 1996)
- 9.(1) adult April 28, 1994: L. Grover, mobs: Highway 99 at Boundary Bay, Delta (Toochin 1996)
- 10.(1) adult April 30, 1994: Rick Toochin & Ian Campbell, mobs: Ladner & Richmond (Toochin 1996)
- 11.(1) adult May 27, 1994: Peter Ward: Chilliwack Airport (Toochin 1996)
- 12.(1) adult April 18-22, 1995: Paul Harvey, Dale A. Jensen, mobs: Pitt Meadows (Toochin 1996)
- 13.(1) adult April 28, 1995: Lee Haggart, mobs: Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Ladner (Toochin 1996)
- 14.(1) adult March 20, 1999: Stuart Holwill: Pitt Meadows (Toochin 2012a)
- 15.(1) adult April 14, 1999: Murray Brown: Pitt Meadows (Toochin 2012a)
- 16.(1) adult April 18-20, 1999: Dan Bastaja, mobs (photo) Sea Island, Cora Brown Subdivision, Richmond (Shepard 1999)
- 17.(1) adult April 21, 1999: Richmond (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 18.(1) adult April 21, 1999: Murray Brown: Kilby Provincial Park (Shepard 1999, Toochin 2012a)
- 19.(1) adult April 24, 1999: Jeff Starchuck: near Mound Hill Park, Cloverdale (Toochin 2012a)
- 20.(1) adult April 25, 1999: Ken Summers: Aldergrove (Shepard 1999, Toochin 2012a)
- 21.(1) adult April 26-28, 1999: Dan O'Brien, and other observers: Yellow Point, Nanaimo (Shepard 1999)
- 22.(1) adult May 9, 1999: Chris Buis: 6905 Bradner Road, Abbotsford (Shepard 1999)
- 23.(1) adult August 18, 1999: Dan G. Derbyshire, Devon Anderson, mobs: (photo) RPBO, Metchosin (Shepard 2000)
- 24.(1) adult September 14, 1999: Dan G. Derbyshire, David Allinson (photo) RPBO, Metchosin (Shepard 2000)
- 25.(1) adult April 14-18, 2003: Istvan Orosi, mobs (photo) Deer Lake Park, Burnaby (Cecile 2003c, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult April 18-21, 2003: Bill McMann, Jennifer Holebrook. mobs (photo) Rannie Rd, Pitt Meadows (Cecile 2003b, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult April 29, 2003: Jason Osterhold: Swan-e-set Golf Course, Pitt Meadows (Cecile 2003c, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult June 1, 2003: Mary Peet-Leslie: Grant Narrows Dyke Trail, Pitt Meadows (Cecile 2003d, Toochin 2012a)

- 26.(1) adult July 21, 2003: B. Harvey: near Fintry Delta, south west of Vernon
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 27.(1) adult May 14, 2004: Jenny Erickson (photo) 64th and Scott Road, Delta
(Cecile 2004c, Toochin 2012a)
- 28.(1) adult April 1 & 15, 2007: Chris Gadsden: Sumas Central Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 29.(1) adult May 3, 2007: Dave Beeke : north East Corner of Castleman and 10655 Chapman
Road, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 30.(1) adult September 17, 2007: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Mount Matheson
(Toochin 2012b)
- 31.(1) adult July 20, 2008: Steen Peterson: above Westwood Lake and over the Parkway,
Nanaimo (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 32.(1) adult May 18, 2010: Rick Toochin: Chilliwack Airport (Toochin 2012c)
- 33.(1) adult April 17-18, 2011: Rick Toochin (photo) Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
(1) adult April 19, 2011: Len and Diane Jellicoe: Highway 1 & No. 3rd, Abbotsford
(Toochin 2012c)
(1) adult April 19, 2011: Cl: Vye Road and Whatcom Road, Abbotsford (Toochin 2012c)
- 34.(1) adult April 23, 2012: RT (photo) below Sumas Mountain, East Abbotsford
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
(1) adult April 24, 2012: Greg Stuart: on a wire eating vole beside Hwy 1 near No. 3 Road,
Abbotsford (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
(1) adult April 26, 2012: RT, Cl (photo) Chilliwack (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 35.(1) adult April 27, 2014: Noreen Sadiwnyk, mobs (photo) near Chase and Pritchard,
east of Kamloops (D. Cecile pers. comm.)
- 36.(1) adult May 3, 2014: Ted Hillary: Salmon Arm (D. Cecile pers. comm.)
- 37.(1) immature May 9, 2014: Rick Toochin: Abbotsford (R. Toochin pers. obs.)
- 38.(1) immature May 11, 2014: mobs: 21620 3rd Ave, Langley (P. Levesque pers. comm.)
- 39.(1) adult May 18, 2014: Phil Ranson, mobs (photo) Jones Road and Mission Road, near
Williams Lake (P. Ranson pers. comm.)
- 40.(1) adult May 19-21, 2014: Jody McBlain: near Canyon (D. Cecile pers. comm.)
- 41.(1) adult May 27, 2014: Ted Hillary: Vaseux Lake (T. Hillary pers. comm.)
- 42.(1) adult June 1, 2014: Paul Levesque: East Vancouver (P. Levesque pers. comm.)
- 43.(1) adult June 13, 2014: Rick Toochin: along Highway 17 east of Port Mann Bridge, Surrey
(R. Toochin pers. obs.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult May 20, 1990: D. Mike Price: Highway 17 near Massey Tunnel, Delta
(Dorsey 1996, Toochin 2012a)
- 2.(1) adult December 14, 2003: Jessica Murray: Sidney (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult January 11, 2006: Gordie Gadsden: Kilby Provincial Park (Toochin 2012c)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of White-tailed Kite records in British Columbia:

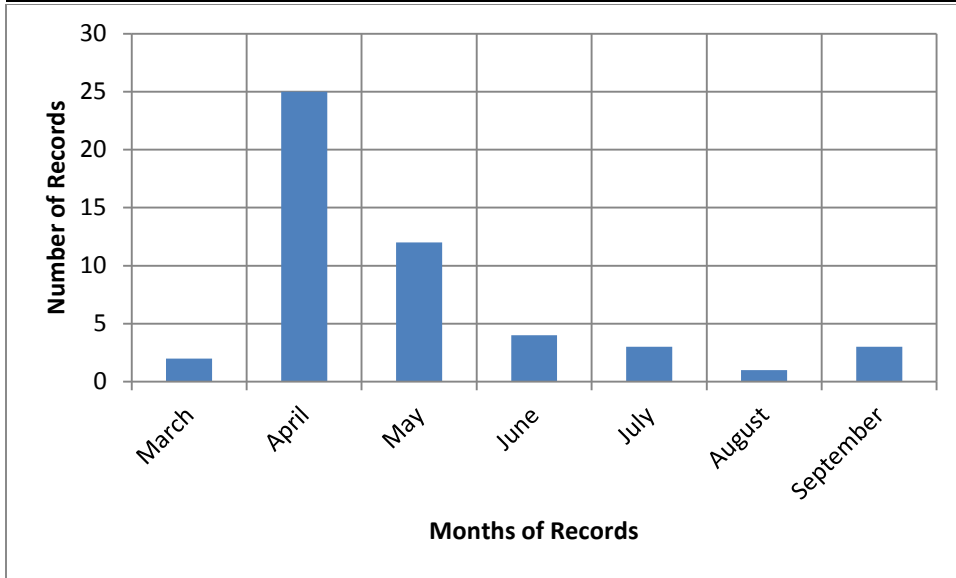


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the spring of this species with April and May having the highest number of records.

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