



Artwork courtesy of Joan Garvey

Swallow-tailed Kite Project Field Notes:

Kites nesting near White Bluff along the Pearl River

By Jennifer Coulson

The first indications that Swallow-tailed Kites might be nesting in the White Bluff, Mississippi, area were from aerial surveys which OAS conducted in 2021. I observed a single kite flying low on July 14, and a roost of four kites on July 22, and then John Nelson observed a roost of 19 kites on August 4th. These kites were all seen near the Pearl River below the MS-44 bridge in northern Marion County.

The White Bluff spot has remained in my memory bank as a place to check on aerial surveys, and I have seen the occasional kite or two there now and again, hunting or flying in a pattern as if it might be patrolling the airspace over a nest, but I wasn't able to confirm nesting until this year.

On June 8, 2024, pilot, Wayne Wilson and I were flying in his Cessna 150, a small two-seater airplane. The first part of the flight had not been very productive, making the discovery of a group of 6 kites at 11:25 a.m. especially exciting. The number of kites was interesting, but their behaviors were even more so. As we circled overhead at an altitude of about 800 feet, we focused on a group of three adults chasing and striking an adult Red-tailed Hawk as it soared over their breeding territories. I exclaimed, "There *has* to be a nest here!" The hawk flew away from the angry mob of kites and out of sight. Only four minutes later two adults chased an adult Bald Eagle over this same area, and all birds headed south. The pair of kites returned after escorting the eagle away from their airspace.

Convinced that there was at least one nest here and probably several, we circled for another 20 minutes, while Wayne followed kite movements and I scanned the tops of canopy trees through 12-power binoculars searching for nests. I failed to find a nest from the air, but named the suspected nest the "Hit Redtail-Chasing Eagle" nest. I could barely contain my excitement because it had been a long time since I had found a solid lead, and this was a lead that was sure to further grant goals of conserving kites on working forests! The White Bluff nesting neighborhood was a patchwork of bottomland hardwood forest, upland pine forest and pine plantation.

I researched the ownership of the White Bluff kite area and one of the landowners sourced wood to International Paper's mill in Bogalusa. Our partners at IP introduced me to the landowner who was interested in kites and the working forest collaboration. On June 13, John Nelson and I met the landowner to obtain a key and get a tour of the properties. Behind two locked gates, we pulled our trucks over to discuss a few of the roads. As we climbed out of my truck, I could hear kites. They were giving "happy" calls behind me, and I wondered if adults were displaying over a fledgling. And as luck would have it, one of the other landowners just happened to be driving by and pulled over to chat. He told us where he had been seeing kites while fishing and gave us permission to study kites on his property too.

Kites began alarm-calling, and soon rallied support, amassing to a group of 8. John and I investigated and I inadvertently flushed a Great Horned Owl perched low in a stand of pine plantation trying to avoid low-swooping kites. The White Bluff kites had a variety of large raptorial predators to contend with. We identified a trapping spot near the suspected "Hit Redtail-Chasing Eagle" nest area and called it a day.



White Bluff male captured on a working forest and outfitted with a GSM-GPS transmitter

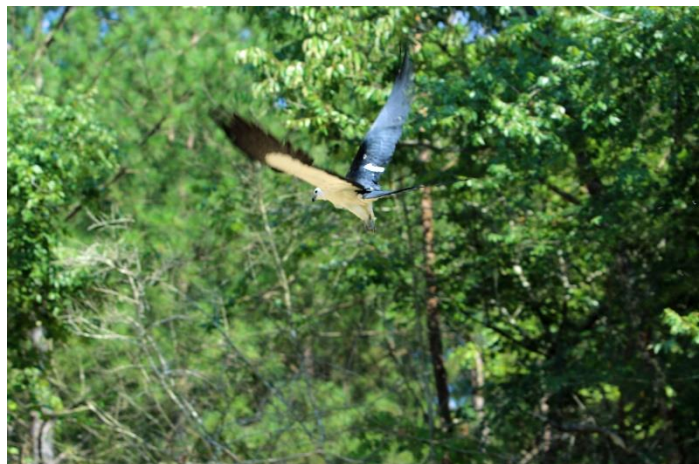
John Nelson and I returned two days later to attempt to capture a kite and place a tracking device on it. We arrived to observe 4 adults circling an area where I suspected a nest. We set up the nets and tethered my Great Horned Owl on a perch between the nets. Within three minutes a kite hit the top of the tall net but immediately backed out. My heart sank, thinking that may have been our only chance. We had not been able to catch a kite yet this season, and the clock was ticking. We waited some nerve-wracking minutes hiding in brush on opposite side of the nets. We finally caught the White Bluff male at 8:45 AM with 7 more adults circling overhead.

I was determined to find the "Hit Redtail-Chasing Eagle" nest from the air, because our ground efforts had failed to produce a nest. I knew the nest had to be close to the hawk and eagle mobbing site, so on the June 21 aerial survey, I repeatedly searched the bottomland hardwood

tracks to the north and south of a track of pine plantation. No nest. I couldn't believe I was going to have to give up. But then I thought to myself, "What am I doing wrong? Maybe the nest is not typical. Maybe I am assuming too much." So we circled back around, again and again. Then I noticed a narrow line of tall trees one tree deep along a road through the pine plantation. Two of those trees were spikey-topped sweetgums, and bingo! I found the nest in one of them! The nest was empty with a recent fledgling perched beneath it.

On June 25, Tom Coulson, Travis Carroll, John and I found the White Bluff tagged kite's nest from the ground and searched for the fledgling. John found a Great Horned Owl perched low in an oak tree next to the nest tree. We did not find any kite remains, but we also did not find the fledgling. The adults didn't seem too upset, so hopefully the fledgling was OK.

On the July 13th flight we searched the White Bluff kite nesting neighborhood again, hoping to find another nest. The nest I found was a stone's throw from the spot where we trapped the White Bluff male, along a trail we had all walked multiple times in search of a nest. In fact, it was where I had seen the four kites circling on the morning that we trapped the White Bluff male, and I remember telling John, "There has to be a nest right there." I wanted to name it "Humiliating" but later decided to call it the "Trapping Trail" nest.



Release of the White Bluff male

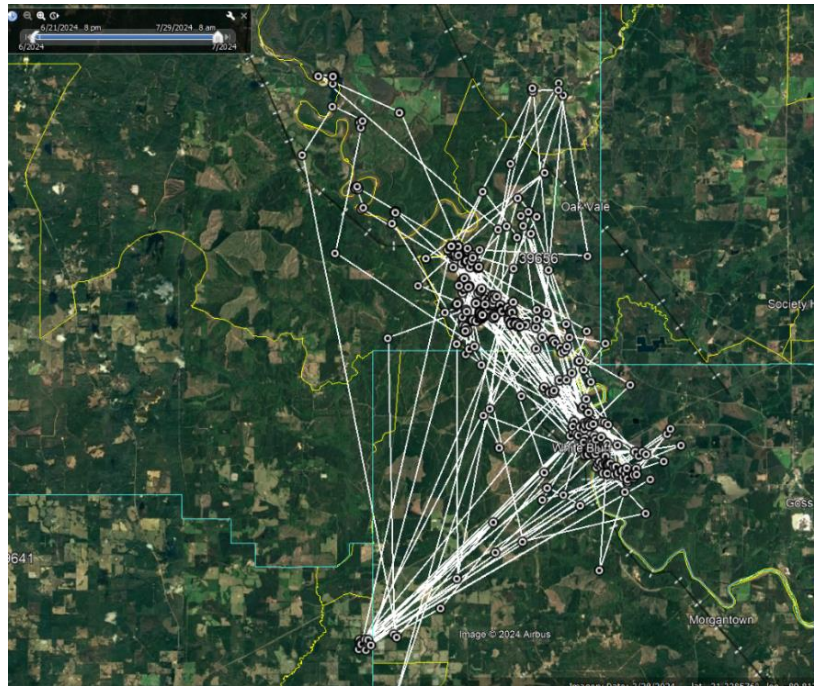
I'd like to end this journal entry with the July 16 magic moment! John and I were to return the key for the White Bluff area, so we visited the site once more. I had always wanted to drive over the MS-44 bridge to look for kites and there was no traffic, so we actually stopped on the 5,025-foot-long bridge. One kite was hunting north of the bridge and three were circling south of it. One of the three was a fledgling! At 11:36 AM we watched as the fledgling circled and got lower and lower over the water. I told John, "Watch the fledgling! It's going to bathe or drink on the water!"

Like a pilot learning to fly and doing touch-and-goes, the fledgling kept aborting the mission, unsure as to whether it could touchdown on the water and lift off again before running into a large and looming sandbar. It aborted at least three but probably four times and almost ran into the sandbar several times. Its fly skills were clearly still a little shaky, but it did succeed in bathing on the river. I told John, "That's the first time in 30-something years of studying kites, that I have ever seen a fledgling bathing and drinking." John wrapped up the observation by saying, "Why didn't we think to video it?"

As for the White Bluff tagged male, he remains local, and he has visited several other kite nesting neighborhoods upriver from where we captured him. His last location, on July 29, is just 4 miles north of where he nested, possibly indicating that he is still attending his fledgling. His

two farthest foraging areas that he frequents are 7 miles to the south-southwest and 10 miles to the north-northwest of where he nested. The foraging locations included 14 over hayfields and 6 over pine plantations.

OAS would like to acknowledge its partners on the Swallow-tailed Kite use of working forests project: American Bird Conservancy, Avian Research and Conservation Institute, International Paper, Weyerhaeuser, Mississippi State University, and McDaniel Charitable Foundation. For more updates on tagged kites and their movements, visit Orleans Audubon Society's YouTube channel or the OAS Facebook page.



Tracks of the White Bluff male, depicting his breeding home range



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