

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*)

NMPIF level: Species Conservation Concern, Level 2 (SC2)

NMPIF assessment score: 15

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: No special status

New Mexico BCRs: 16, 18, 35

Primary breeding habitat(s): Urban (southeast plains)

Other habitats used: Agricultural, Middle Elevation Riparian

Summary of Concern

Mississippi Kite is a migratory raptor that has successfully colonized urban habitats (parks, golf courses, residential neighborhoods) in the western portion of its breeding range over the last several decades. Little is known about species ecology outside of the breeding season and, despite stable or increasing populations at the periphery of its range, it remains vulnerable due to its small population size.

Associated Species

Cooper's Hawk, Ring-necked Pheasant, Mourning Dove, American Robin

Distribution

Mississippi Kite is erratically distributed across portions of the east and southeast, the southern Great Plains, and the southwest, west to central Arizona and south to northwest Chihuahua. It is most abundant in areas of the Gulf Coast, and in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. The species is a long-distance migrant, wintering in Argentina, Paraguay, and perhaps other locations in South America.

In New Mexico, Mississippi Kite is most common in cities and towns of the southeast plains. It is also present in the Middle Rio Grande valley north to Corrales, and the Pecos River Valley north to Fort Sumner and possibly Puerto de Luna (Parker 1999, Parmeter et al. 2002).

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Mississippi Kite occupies different habitats in different parts of its range, including mature hardwood forests in the southeast, rural woodlands in mixed and shortgrass prairie in the Great Plains, and mixed riparian woodlands in the southwest. The species nests most abundantly in shelterbelt plantings of the southern Great Plains, and—since the late 1960s—in urban/suburban areas of Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma and (most recently) New Mexico (Shaw 1985). Nests are typically placed in isolated trees or human-made tree groves, less frequently in trees in riparian woodland. Surrounding areas may range from prairie to urban neighborhoods. This species always favors trees at or near a woodland edge, or in a situation with extensive treeless habitat nearby. A wide variety of tree species may be used. Roosting groups of 10 or more individuals are frequently found near one or more nests. Typical clutch size is two (Parker 1999).

Urban nesting was first recognized in 1978, and thereafter was noticed extensively in 4 states where preferred habitat is savanna- or parklike with medium-aged or older trees. Urbanization has been almost entirely a Great Plains phenomenon, except for eastern New Mexico and a few other areas (Gennaro 1988). Urban populations occupy parks, golf courses, and residential neighborhoods, and show greater productivity than rural populations (Parker 1996). Urban nests in Texas were in areas of greater housing density than city average (Shaw 1985). Kites diving at humans to defend nests have become a problem in some areas. This species is an opportunistic predator, consuming a wide array of invertebrate and small vertebrate species. It sometimes forages in flocks (Parker 1999). Mississippi Kites arrive in New Mexico in late April or May, and remain through August.

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	3
THREATS	3
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	4
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	3
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	2
COMBINED SCORE	15

Mississippi Kite is a Species Conservation Concern, Level 2 species for New Mexico, with an total assessment score of 15. At the continental level, it receives a high PIF vulnerability score of 4 for its small population size.

Population Size

PIF estimates a species population of 190,000. About 186,000 individuals were observed passing Veracruz, Mexico in the fall of 1998; this was estimated to be 75-95% of the species population (Maxwell 1996, Parker 1999). Parker (1999) cites an estimate of 100 pairs in New Mexico; the present total may be higher.

Population Trend

Historically, populations declined in the southeast due to persecution by humans, but remained fairly stable in the Great Plains. In recent decades, populations have been stable or increasing in most areas, with a concurrent shift from rural to more urban settings. This species is not well surveyed by BBS in New Mexico; it receives a score of 2 for local population trend by NMPIF, indicating a stable or increasing population.

Threats

Successful adaptation to planted woodlands and urban areas in the Great Plains and southwest makes the species secure in the United States, although it is declining in the core of its range in the southern Great Plains. Loss or fragmentation of hardwood forest may threaten some eastern populations. Loss of shelterbelts may cause only temporary disturbance and displacement of breeding colonies in the plains and southwest, because sufficient woodlands, especially urban, should remain to guarantee continued nest-site abundance (Parker 1996). Riparian-nesting populations in the southwest remain vulnerable to habitat disturbance (Glinski and Gennaro 1988). Overall, however, threat to this species in New Mexico is regarded as low. Harassment of humans may create management challenges in some areas, especially around golf courses and city parks in the western Great Plains.

Management Issues and Recommendations

No special management is needed for Mississippi Kite in New Mexico at this time, but the population remains small and should continue to be monitored.

NMPIF Recommendations

- Avoid removal of nest trees and shelterbelts.
- Maintain healthy riparian woodland with large cottonwoods.

- Carry out public education as needed to increase acceptance of urban nesting.

Species Conservation Objectives

NMPIF Objectives

- Maintain or expand existing populations.

Sources of Information

Gennaro, A. L. 1988. Breeding biology of an urban population of Mississippi Kites in New Mexico. Pp. 188–190 *in* Proceedings of the Southwest Raptor Management Symposium and Workshop (R. L. Glinski et al., eds.) Natl. Wildl. Fed., Washington, D.C.

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