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The Trouble with Kites, and by the Way, What Does it Mean to be a State "Fully Protected Species"

by Pete Bloom, Chris Niemela, and Scott Thomas

State Fully Protected Species. Common and widespread. Drastic decrease in population. Extinction predicted for this species. Species makes a remarkable comeback. Local populations show downward trend. Perhaps you've heard some of these contradictory phrases used to describe White-tailed Kites' tenuous history in California over the last century. How much of this is true and how much is based simply on anecdotal records? Do we really know and understand the current status of White-tailed kites in California? Are kites really in trouble?

First of all, what does it mean to be a State Fully Protected Species? Other high profile avian species on this list, created as a precursor to the State Endangered Species Act (ESA), include California Condor, Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle, Brown Pelican, California Least Tern and Light-footed Clapper Rail. Each of these species, except the White-tailed Kite and Golden Eagle, were later placed on both State and Federal ESAs, and thus received considerably more protection. The kite, presumably because it was thought to be increasing in numbers, was not protected under the wings of the State ESA, the Golden Eagle is more abundant and has a large species distribution in the U.S. but together with the kite seem to be the only two to have drastically decreased in southwestern California.

All of the aforementioned Fully Protected species, except the White-tailed Kite, have received at least some, and in some cases extensive, State and Federal conservation funding. With the possible exception of the Light-footed Clapper Rail and Golden Eagle, all have done well to very well in terms of population recovery. Principal reasons for the decline of the condor, peregrine, bald eagle and pelican were all contaminated related, while the tern, rail, Golden Eagle, and kite were largely habitat related.

Terns lost most of their nesting beaches, but were provided extensive protection from people and, more importantly, from predators. Subsequently, their numbers have soared. Rails lost most of their wetland estuaries, and continue to live a precarious existence, but they are at least monitored, and solid research has been and is being conducted. Kites and Golden Eagles on the other hand have received virtually no habitat protection, except that which was obtained indirectly in NCCP, park, and sanctuary set asides or donations, and they have received no monitoring or research money.

The White-tailed Kite is a medium-sized raptor often observed hovering over open grassland or sage scrub in search of mice, or perched atop an oak tree. Its mostly white plumage is very distinctive and makes it easy to locate. White-tailed Kites have a 2 longer breeding season than all other local diurnal raptors and, also uniquely, can produce more than one brood in a season. They typically place their small nest at the very top of any one of a variety of different species of tree, as long as there is open foraging habitat nearby.

We are of the opinion that the kite, at least in San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, and Ventura counties, is in a world of hurt, and warrants focused research and conservation efforts. Even without conducting extensive field research or digging into historical records, it would be safe to say that numbers of kites in

southwestern California have dropped substantially. This statement could be based simply on the fact that a huge percentage of kite's foraging and nesting habitat (grasslands, open sage scrub, estuaries, marshland) has been lost to urban development. Open grassland and coastal habitats don't only appeal to kites, but also appeal to developers.

Unlike most raptors in southern California, White-tailed Kites are thought to be nomadic, with populations moving in response to fluctuating prey densities. While widely accepted, this hypothesis remains that, only a hypothesis. Essentially, very little is known about kite movements once the young have fledged. Kites have been known to disappear from traditional territories for years, and then reestablish themselves years later in what appears to be a productive prey year. The question then arises as to whether the kites simply temporarily relocated to another area, or died. Color-marking or attaching radio-transmitters to individuals may be the only way to discover what is really happening. Regardless, there is still no arguing the fact that many historical kite territories have been covered in concrete or golf turf.

In the early 1970s, up to 200 White-tailed Kites could be seen flying in from every direction, dropping down from the sky to roost in the San Joaquin Marsh adjacent to UCI. It was a site to behold. Other roosts in Orange County simultaneously numbered five to forty individuals. Now we would be lucky to see 20 birds roosting at one of a few remaining local roost sites. This drastic decline in numbers of roosting individuals surely reflects a decline in the number of breeding pairs in the area. Local Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Surveys from Los Angeles and Orange counties also further substantiate this decline in numbers of kites.

In Orange County in 2007, during one of the worst drought years on record, Audubon members estimate that perhaps as few as 5-6 pairs nested out of the roughly 30-40 pairs that existed in only a few years prior. A major concern is that an extended drought, coupled with rapid habitat loss and habitat conversion, could deliver a devastating blow to the remaining kite populations in coastal southern California. So, our kites are in trouble. Now what? We can start by treating them with the management warranted under their Fully Protected Species status, as were other Fully Protected Species that were later granted ESA status. We should start taking habitat loss and degradation, especially of grasslands, more seriously. Optimally, we need to preserve essentially all remaining kite breeding territories, foraging habitat, and roost sites, as well, consider management decisions in preservation and outdoor recreational 3 areas. We should promote more grassland restoration and preservation opportunities in neglected landscapes and open spaces, which could in turn support healthy prey populations. Kites are grassland habitat specialists and are highly dependent on three species of grassland-inhabiting rodents, namely, California vole, western harvest mouse, and the non-native house mouse. Preserving the remaining threatened habitats that support these three species of rodents, be it native or non-native grassland, would help ensure the long-term survival of local kite populations.

We should note that there are sometimes misconceptions about the adaptability of kites to urban development. Although it may appear that some kites have adapted to nesting on the urban edge, the reality is that very few kites that nest in these areas ever successfully fledge young. Highly territorial in nature, and dense in numbers, nesting American Crows have been observed harassing and killing fledgling kites. This often results in urban kite breeding territories that act more as local ecological sinks for the species.

Furthermore, because kites are so recognizable and sometimes forage in small, but highly visible grassy strips along freeways and urban slopes, there is a false perception that they are thriving. Actually, with further investigation, we find that this foraging behavior only subsists for short periods of time and represents only a few kites accounting for many sightings. The reality is that these marginal open space areas may be all that remain that resemble grassland habitat. In addition, CalTrans, the agency that manages freeway landscapes, has been steadily converting its non-native grasslands to irrigated shrubs, which are basically useless to kites, their prey, and other raptors.

The good news is, because kites are so visible, it is feasible to get an accurate count of the number of individuals in a localized area. Accurate population counts and knowledge of kite whereabouts are the first steps in addressing the decline of White-tailed Kites in southern California. Each one of us could help preserve our small local kite population by adding your knowledge of kite nesting and/or roosting locations. Why not make a small but meaningful contribution to ensure the persistence of this unique raptor in southwestern California.

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