

The Kansas-Tennessee Kite Connection

One of the oldest programs carried out by the Mid-South Raptor Center involves the efforts to reintroduce the Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia Mississippiensis*) to historic breeding areas of West Tennessee. The program involves removing juvenile kites from problem nests in breeding areas of Kansas and transporting them to Tennessee for release. In the years before the kites were sent to Tennessee it was common practice for problem nests to be destroyed and the young birds killed.

Areas along the Mississippi River throughout West Tennessee were traditionally breeding areas for Mississippi Kites. The bird was actually named by John James Audubon when he observed the birds on one of his trips along the river. Many early birding records in the Memphis area recorded fairly large numbers of kites, but by the early 1960's their numbers were almost gone. In the 1970's and 1980's their numbers were so low that some years saw only a single sighting. It was obvious to everyone involved that some plan was needed to reestablish this bird in the Mississippi River counties of Tennessee.

A plan was developed initially by Mr. John Stokes of the Memphis Zoo & Aquarium working in cooperation with the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks to transport juvenile birds to Memphis for release. Only three birds arrived that first year. Over the years the numbers varied from no birds at all to upwards of 40 birds in some years. In 2008 fourteen birds arrived bringing the total number of birds released to almost 400. For several years all birds were released on the grounds of the Memphis Zoo. Later as breeding pairs became established new release sites were located at local state parks including Meeman Shelby Forest and T.O. Fuller. As more and more birds were observed in the Memphis/Shelby County areas the release sites moved farther north up the Mississippi River. In recent years birds have been released at Reelfoot Lake State Park in Lake County and Paris Landing State Park in Henry County.

All birds are banded with US Fish & Wildlife Service identification bands so any recovered birds can be identified.

In 2005 a group of nine juvenile kites arrived from a Louisiana rehabilitation center that was almost totally destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. These birds were successfully released that year with the five birds that arrived from Kansas.

With the continuing success of this program it is hopeful that in the future it will no longer be necessary to import Mississippi Kites from other areas. This program is one that the Mid-South Raptor Center is proud to be a part of and we will continue to provide assistance for as long as necessary.