

Mississippi Kites nesting in New Jersey

More than thirty years ago, Mississippi Kites began showing up annually in New Jersey in late spring – early summer, with some lingering for weeks and a few appearing again in late summer. Although the species has occurred in many parts of the state, the vast majority of the records have come from Cape May, where as many as a dozen can be seen together in some years. The highest total is 17 birds found at Belleplain State Forest in 2013, a big cicada year there, and a similar number at West Cape May in 2016. Most of the birds seen are sub-adults, but there have been numerous sightings of adults, as well. By the late 1980's many of us were sure that Mississippi Kites would be nesting in the state very soon. Veteran hawk watcher Clay Sutton had summered kites in both Cumberland and Cape May counties during the 1990's but could never track down a nest. So, year after year, the kites continued to come, but still no evidence of breeding.

Ironically, the kites pulled a fast one on New Jersey and went right on by. In June 2008, a trio (a male and two females) of Mississippi Kites set up housekeeping in a big tree on a city street in Newmarket, New Hampshire, and successfully raised one young. Not only was this the first nesting record for that state, it was the first confirmed sighting of the species in New Hampshire! That same year, Connecticut's first recorded nesting of Mississippi Kites was established near Hartford. The following year, a pair was thought to be nesting at Root, New York, west of Albany, and nesting was confirmed there in 2010. In 2012, a pair of Mississippi Kites was found nesting in Sterling Forest, Orange County, New York, practically in sight of the New Jersey state line.

Finally, our time has come. On May 31, 2015, Eileen Bennett observed two Mississippi Kites circling over her home in Waretown, Ocean County. One or two birds continued to be seen in the area by dozens of birders to the end of July. Nesting was strongly suspected, but not confirmed. This year, on May 27, Eileen again spotted two kites soaring over her home, and continued to see them in subsequent days. On June 4, her husband saw one of the kites carrying a stick disappear into a wooded area nearby. The birds continued to be seen by numerous observers throughout June. Then, on July 9, Andy Egan and Jennifer Crusco visited the area in hopes of seeing the kites. After seeing the birds flying around, they discovered the nest site in a pine tree in the back yard of a private residence. One of the adults, presumably the male, was observed flying into the tree with prey and dropping it, and then the other adult proceeded to feed the prey to a chick.

This represents the first confirmed nesting of Mississippi Kite in New Jersey. As the species seems to be pushing northward, we can hope to see additional expansion of its breeding range into our state.



Mississippi Kite. Waretown, NJ, 17 July 2015.
Photo: Eileen Bennett