

168-01-2003

**PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM**

This form is presented as a convenience and guide. It can be used if desired, but is not necessary for submitting a report. Species requiring documentation are those on the Review List or not on the Official List of Birds of Pennsylvania. Send documentation to:

**Nick Pulcinella, Secretary**  
**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**  
613 Howard Ave.  
West Chester, PA 19380  
nickpul@bellatlantic.net

**SPECIES:** Swallow-tailed Kite, *Elanoides forficatus*  
**Subspecies** not known

**NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS** 1 **SEX** unknown

**AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S)** (e.g. immature; adult in breeding plumage; year for gulls; basic or alternate if you prefer those terms; state of molt if applicable): Appeared to be juvenile, based on tail size & tail shape, but no other indications evident.

**DATE OF OBSERVATION** 4/27/03 **TIME** 8:45 AM approx.

**LOCATION** Sumneytown (near Green Lane), Montgomery County, PA

**EXACT SITE** (e.g. name of park, lake, road) Unami Creek Park parking lot on Swamp Creek Rd.

**OBSERVER REPORTING:**

Todd A. Watkins  
721 N. 7<sup>th</sup> St.  
Emmaus, PA 18049  
watkins@Lehigh.edu  
610.967.3872

**OTHER OBSERVERS:** Maxwell B. Watkins (son, 9, but quite good at IDs, independently identified it right away also)

**HABITAT** Soaring north-eastward above a wooded (deciduous) stream, near small rural park, brushy fairly open tract across stream, but surrounded by relatively tall trees, leaves just coming out. A few dispersed houses along the road through the woods, so not a totally isolated area, but the woods is mature and large. A Unami Creek is favored trout fishing stream, and a very good migration spot for warblers, etc. in the spring.

**DISTANCE TO BIRD:** It was roughly (crude estimate) 150 feet above us. Looked about two trees higher than the trees.

**VIEWING CONDITIONS** Sunny, about 55 degrees, slight breeze, clear blue sky above. Lovely spring morning. Bird appeared from southwest overhead, sun was to east. Bird continued over us toward the northeast.

**OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED** Leica 8x32 BA binoculars

**DESCRIPTION & BEHAVIOR**

Dark forked tail unmistakable, tail looked somewhat shorter than the length of the body w/head, two parts of fork held apart at about a 45 degree angle. Wings with very dark (to black) ends and obvious dark trailing edges. Full body, head and leading wing edges white. Clean high contrast division between the dark and white. Head looked small relative to wings, and also relative to the vultures' nearby. Significantly smaller than several soaring Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures nearby. Outstretched wings bent slightly but clearly at wrist as it glided, beating only occasionally. Legs, bill, eyes unfortunately unobserved. Watched clearly for about 2 minutes before it glided out of sight over treetops. Offhand, in the few seconds before I got binoculars on it, assumed it was a gull given its white coloring, dark wingtips, location and gliding behavior. Dark wingtips were clear even unaided, but dark trailing edges became clear in binocs. Less bulky in body than a Cooper's Hawk that passed shortly afterwards at same location. No markings on breast of any type, quite distinct shape and coloring and tail from the Cooper's. The Coop was a bit lower in altitude, closer to treetops, heading West, not North-northwest. Much larger than the several common grackles and two Blue Jays flying over about then as well. White body color was similar (perhaps bluer tinted white) against the sky to the fly-by Great Egret (seen at much greater distance) seen a minute or two before, and much whiter looking than the light part of the wings on the several Turkey Vultures min the area at the time. Black looked darker than the Turkey Vultures dark too, more like the two crows making a racket chasing each other nearby. From below it was hard to tell if its wings were held flat or angled, but if I had to lay money, I'd say they were flat. Didn't tip back and forth like the vultures, it's flight was more direct, much steadier gliding, and looked purposeful. Didn't look like it was hunting or hawking, just moving through.

**VOCALIZATIONS**

Did not hear any vocalization.

**SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES**

Falcon-like shape separated it from buteos, accipiters, vultures (which were nearby) osprey or eagles. Obvious forked tail separated it from (my first quick instinct) gulls, and from falcons or other kites (and made me scream for my two sons to "quick, look! You'll hardly ever see one of those!!"). Head shape, and clearly seen stark contrast between dark/black trailing wing and white forward on wings separated it from frigatebirds, terns or skimmers (not to mention the woodland stream and brushy field habitat). About 90 minutes after sighting, I actually checked my European field guide to rule out European kites too. White & Black color scheme ruled out Red Kite, forked tailed ruled out others.

**SIMILAR EXPERIENCE**

Never saw one before, but have spent many fall days at Hawk Mountain, about 30 miles from our home. We have a family membership and go regularly, so I feel quite familiar with most eastern raptors flying overhead at reasonably close range like this one was. Snail Kites (in FL), Black-Shouldered Kites positively ID'd several times each. Saw many Eurasian Black Kites while living over there. Once saw two European Montagu's Harriers, which have vaguely similar colorings, but very different overall shape, in Austria several years ago. Seen thousands of Gannets while living in England, and dozens of Frigatebirds and Boobies recently in Puerto Rico. I'm less comfortable with variations among some gulls and terns, but no way this one was a gull or tern. This was a raptor.

**ARE YOU POSITIVE ABOUT IDENTIFICATION?**

This one seems pretty hard to mistake. I've never reported a rare sighting to the state level before, so I suppose there is some possibility it is wrong, but I am as confident as I ever am. Even that ignored Robin could be a Fieldfare.... Since I'm no amazing ID expert (some sparrows, flycatchers and peeps drive me nuts), the only reason I'm reporting this one is it seems so clear and obvious. It is certainly none of the traditional Eastern raptors, of that I am fully sure, nor was it any tern or gull, again of that I am sure. If not a Swallow-Tailed Kite, then the species would have to be some even rarer foreign bird I'm unaware of. Even my 9 year-old-son Maxwell Watkins (who is fairly accomplished himself--his life list is over 300--but usually waits for me to make the call), yelled out "Kite, Dad, It's a Kite!"

**REFERENCES CONSULTED**

During: had my old Golden Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America.  
Afterward, about 90 mins later: Sibley's, as well as Collins Pocket Guide to Birds of Britain & Europe.

**DATE OF THIS REPORT**      April 27, 2003 (same afternoon as morning sighting)

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation – Round One**

Species: Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*)

Date of Sighting: 27 April 2003 to 27 April 2003

Location: SUMNEYTOWN

County: MONTGOMERY

Observer(s): Todd Wilkins

Date of Submission: 2003

Submitted by: Todd Wilkins

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

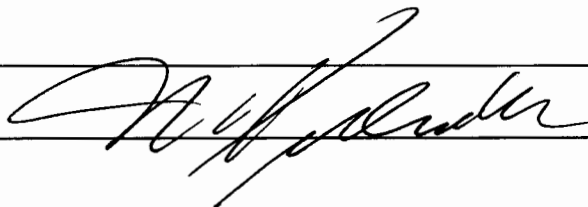
Specimen: No

Recording: NO

| Member       | Class I | Class II | Class III | Class IV-A | Class IV-B | Class IV-C | Class V | Abstain |
|--------------|---------|----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|---------|---------|
| G. Armistead |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| D. Heathcote |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| P. Guris     |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| J. Stanley   |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| E. Witmer    |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| R. Leberman  |         |          |           |            |            |            |         |         |
| M. Sharp     |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |
| TOTALS       |         |          | 6         |            |            |            |         |         |
| DECISION     |         |          | X         |            |            |            |         |         |

Comments: C/O

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

4/1/04