

171-01-1989

Description also submitted by Jerry McWilliams and published in PA Birds Vol 2 no. 2

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PREPARED BY	
DATE	

Mississippi Kite, Presque Isle, Erie County, May 15th 1989

Ed Kwater

On May 15th 1988, Jerry and Linda McWilliams and I were birding at Niagara Pond on Presque Isle, at around midday. Sam Stull and Bill Bush were installing Black Tern nesting platforms on the opposite side of the pond. Sam suddenly reached for his binoculars in a hurry and looking to the north we saw a medium-sized raptor approaching within a hundred feet of the ground. I identified it as a Mississippi Kite and Jerry quickly agreed. The flight was very buoyant and graceful, The wing beats were quite shallow. The bird was slim and rakish with a long tail and long, sharply pointed wings with fairly broad bases. When flapping the wings were sharply angled. The head was quite large and rounded. The long tail was noticeably notched at the tip. The bird superficially resembled a Peregrine in shape. The following plumage characters were noted. The head was pale gray, the breast and belly darker gray with sparse orange-brown streaking. The underwing coverts were buff with heavier orange-brown streaking. The bases of the primaries were whitish forming pale crescents on the underwings. The underside of the tail had a striking pattern of alternating black and white bars, the terminal black bar being the broadest. The bird flew to within about 70 yards. When flying away the upperparts appeared uniform dark gray.

there was something about this bird which had all of us puzzled; instead of anyone calling out what it was, the four of us just became silent.

After what seemed like a long time, but was in actuality only about a minute, we all began to talk at the same time. "I've got what seems to be a large accipiter, I think," I said. "I'm on a harrier, I think," Bernie said. "I think I've got a goshawk," Dave said. "That doesn't fly like any gos I've ever seen," Fritz said. We were in trouble. We were supposed to be the experts and we had all called the bird something different. Silence reigned once again.

The bird had rusty wing linings resembling an adult Red-shouldered Hawk and what appeared to be a plain, unstreaked breast. The tail was long and narrow (harrier- or accipiter-like) and showed no conspicuous markings, appearing mostly dark. The flight was very buoyant and swallow-like, at times reminding us of a nighthawk. At first it flew toward the lookout, but then reversed its direction and headed away from us. A straight-on view showed a "flat wings" profile with no dihedral. However, when it was flapping the wing tips appeared almost to touch above and below the body, sort of like a man doing jumping jacks. The most unusual behavioral characteristic was the repeated stalling in mid-air, followed by a quick drop down out of the stall, then up again, apparently done to catch or follow insects in the air. Periodically it would circle around with some Broad-winged Hawks and, from all appearances, was about the same size.

Five minutes had now passed and we were still watching this bird. It finally disappeared over the far horizon. Just as it was making its descent for the last time, Bernie finally said what all of us were thinking. We were watching a Mississippi Kite! No other species was remotely possible under the circumstances.

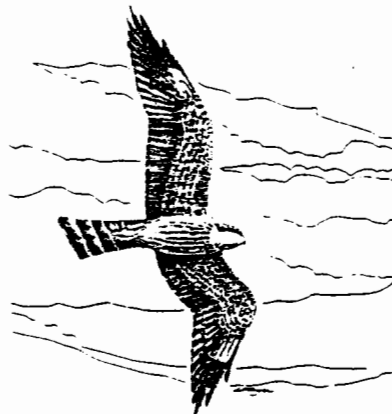
This was the bird that Dave had been waiting for years to see on this lookout. We had often talked about it on those occasions when I was able to join him up there. All his long, lonely hours of checking out each and every

speck bird that appeared in the distance had finally paid off. The ironic thing was that it had happened when three other qualified hawk watchers were there to verify his observation.

Excitement took over. "I can't wait to get back and call Frank and Barbara Haas," Bernie said. Fritz was beaming from ear to ear, but his wife Ann didn't seem nearly as excited as she stood there shivering. Dave was nothing less than ecstatic. I was just relieved that I hadn't seen this bird while alone. I'm still trying to substantiate last summer's Lincoln's Sparrow.

Needless to say we could talk about nothing else for quite a while. But, eventually, we returned to normal and discovered that in all our excitement we had missed the exodus from the mountain. We had all been so unsure of the bird's identity for so long that we had not been able to identify it for most of the others who had been here, but had left during the vigil. They had all been so uncomfortable that the significance of this bird probably would have passed them by anyhow. This was one of those birds that had to be earned!

Shortly thereafter, the rain began to fall. It didn't matter. There were only four of us left as the cold wind had now turned wet. Some hardy broadies were still flying but we almost didn't notice. Everything now seemed anticlimactic. We had finally seen our kite.



171-01-1988

MISSISSIPPI KITE ERIE COUNTY

by Jerry McWilliams

On 15 May 1988 at 11:30 a.m., while watching Sam Stull and Bill Bush build Black Tern nesting platforms on the south side of Niagara Pond on Presque Isle State Park, I noticed Sam reach for his binoculars and look in a northwesterly direction. Accompanying me were Ed Kwater and my wife, Linda, who by now also had the bird in view.

It approached us in a glide, followed by occasional shallow wingbeats. The raptor held its wings in a horizontal position or slightly below the horizontal, resembling a long-winged falcon. When the bird was within 100 yards of us, it turned and flew directly over the pond, giving us excellent opportunities to observe it, though only briefly.

The most outstanding characteristic of this bird, separating it from other raptors, was the long gull-like wings bent at the wrist and narrow at the base with tapering pointed tips. The tail looked all black except at close range, when three distinct but narrow white bands could be clearly seen. The widest portion of black appeared to be at the end of the tail. The lighting made color difficult to detect, but the underside of the flight feathers was unmarked, with some barring seen on the coverts. The underside of the body was heavily streaked.

After the bird passed us, it circled over the pond with the tail partially fanned and made rapid descending and ascending maneuvers to catch insects. Its flight was always buoyant and it only flapped its wings occasionally. In less than ten minutes after the bird was spotted, it circled high and beyond our visibility.

The winds at the time of the sighting were approximately 10 mph from the south. The sky was partially blanketed with altocumulus clouds with intermittent sun and the temperature was about 75°F.

Record No.: 171-01-1988

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # / of /

Species: *Mississippi Kite*

Date of Sighting: 5-15-88

Observer(s): Ed Kwater, Jerry McWilliams

Date of Submission: 1989 Erie

Submitted by: Ed Kwater

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater		X					
B. Haas		X					
F. Haas		X					
R. Leberman		X					
G. McWilliams		X					
S. Santner		X					
P. Schwalbe		X					
TOTALS		7					

DECISION *Accepted Class II*

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

3-1-90