

**Mississippi Kite
Hawk Mountain Sanctuary
Berks/Schuylkill Ctys
March 26, 2008**

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I went to Hawk Mountain on March 26, 2008, because weather predictions were for temperatures to be in the 50's with west or southwest winds. The official spring hawk watch there doesn't start until April 1, but raptors, as always, had been moving since early March. Although in the spring the most advantageous seat is at the far end of the rocks down from the counter's pit, but I'm uncomfortable there so I stayed in the pit knowing that I would be viewing raptors mostly from the sides and backs as they went up-ridge. I mention this only because, as it turned out, being in the pit was advantageous for seeing the bird I'm reporting. I doubt I would even have spotted this bird had I been down front looking down-ridge.

I officially started at 10:30 EST. Winds were from the west 10 – 20 mph, and they stayed that way the entire time I was there. Temps were in the lower 40's when I arrived and eventually got up into the 50's. The sky was two-thirds covered with white, puffy clouds but the sun was shining through the clouds somewhere at all times. The first half hour produced no northbound migrants but there were 11 turkey vultures, 4 black vultures, and three immature Cooper's hawks that went down-ridge into the west wind on the north side, all of which I deemed locals. All three Cooper's did very little flapping and flew relatively straight. As an aside, this could've been the same Cooper's circling back down low on the north side where I couldn't see it and then going out hunting again. It seemed odd to see three immature Cooper's hawks over there in less than 30 minutes.

Around 10:55 EST I spotted a bird on the north side of the ridge, a glass-and-a-half to the left of #5, about half-a-glass up. It was flapping constantly and almost seemed to be bouncing around in the sky. Even though it was at the top end of my vision (Swarovski EL's 10 X 42) I could clearly see that it had crooked and pointed wings and was constantly flapping and moving around in a small area. (I should probably mention here that I've been a counter at Hawk Mountain since the mid 90's, and I'm used to judging depth and size perception from the pit.) I immediately ruled out any buteo because of the shape and what it was doing. The only buteo that would possibly have acted like this bird was a red-shouldered hawk but there were no wing crescents, its wings weren't broad, and nothing about it looked like any buteo I'm familiar with. It was way too small to be an osprey, and frankly that species never crossed my mind. Some sort of falcon was my closest guess at that time but it was too big to be a kestrel or a merlin. Peregrine was an option but I ruled that out for two reasons. It most definitely wasn't acting like any

peregrine that I've seen and its overall body structure wasn't sturdy, bulky, or solid like a peregrine's is. This bird was flying "flighty and floppy."

Northern harrier was an option but it didn't seem right for that species either. For one thing it didn't look to be big enough. And also its wings weren't broad and long or showing any kind of a dihedral. A harrier's wings are always the first things I notice on that bird and I see harriers every day on my home property during the winter months. This bird's tail, in relation to its body, wasn't long and thin like a harrier's is when it has its tail folded. At one point, but only for a split second, it banked and when the sun shone on its back I could clearly see that it had no white uppertail coverts or rump patch. In all honesty at first I tried to make it into a gull, a tern, or large shorebird but as I studied it I negated all of those species. None of those species act like this bird was acting. A tern would've been slighter in build and appearance, have a different tail, and be more fluid. Gulls circle around in the sky and flap a lot on crooked pointed wings but they don't bounce around as if they were on the end of a big rubber band. Also, this bird was not mostly white as a gull would be. From that distance it just looked dark. And it was no shorebird for more reasons than I feel like listing.

It wasn't a sharp-shinned hawk for multiple reasons, especially size, shape, and flight style. Its deep wingbeats were similar to those made by Cooper's hawks when they're flight displaying but its wings were too pointed and its body and tail structure in relation to its wings weren't those of a Cooper's hawk. Cooper's can look like a big cross flying through the sky with long, folded, even tail and broad wings that are straight along their leading edge and which highlight the head projection. Everything about this bird was more pointed and angled. When Cooper's are displaying or doing their floppy mating flight they do deep wingbeats and undulate up and down, but not constantly. This bird never set its wings and then flew some distance between deep wingbeats. It seemed to be in constant motion the whole time. Also, I had just seen three Cooper's go down-ridge on the same side of the mountain closer than this bird was and the contrast was apparent.

The more I watched this bird the more I became convinced that I was looking at a kite, and probably a Mississippi kite, but since it was so far away and I had no scope I figured it would become a non-entity. It was spring and normal migrants would be going up-ridge. Then, suddenly, it swooped down, grabbed at something with its talons, flew back up and began circling again, swooped down a second time, went back up, hung in the air for a few seconds with wings flapping, and once again began circling. Then it began moving down-ridge, coming out of the north heading straight south. It came over #5, crossed over in front of the ridge, coming out in front of #1, and went out over the south side of the mountain. All the while it kept flapping and flying in a very buoyant manner even as it was moving through. When it turned slightly as it crossed in front of me equidistant between the counter's pit and #1, the sun hit it and I saw a mostly dark gray bird. At the angle that it came in I didn't get a good look at the underwings or belly so had there been some brownish or rusty brown color at those places, making it a subadult and not an adult, I wouldn't have seen it. My impression was of an evenly colored dark gray bird with a light head, although I can't say that I saw a completely white head because I didn't. All I can say is that its head was definitely lighter than its body. There

were no mustache marks or a dark top on its head. Its tail was straight, even at the end, and dark. It did not appear to be flared at all. I saw no stripes on the tail but I'm not sure I could've seen them had they been there. Its body was slim but my attention was riveted to its dark, bent, and pointed wings that never seemed to stop their deep, undulating flapping. I only caught a glimpse of some white on the uppersides of the wings toward the trailing edges and I can't say for sure how extensive the white area was. I can't say for sure either if the white was on the secondaries and or further up on the wings as it would be on a subadult bird. I did not see the short outer primary wingtips that are diagnostic of Mississippi kites but I'm not sure I remembered to look for them. As it passed almost out of sight on the south it once again pulled up, effortlessly dropped down, grabbed something or grabbed at something from the air, came back up to its previous height, and then continued flying. It was as if someone had it on a string like a yo-yo that was unfurled and then suddenly yanked back up. It passed slightly to the east of the South Lookout and probably went over very close to some of the sanctuary buildings.

There was no one else on the lookout with me. I had hoped that local guy Ron Homa, who's an excellent hawk watcher, would be there like he had been the day before but he wasn't. When I first saw this bird I quickly looked back at the trail in the hopes that someone would be coming down even if they didn't have raptor identification skills. At least then someone could've verified the presence of the bird. As it turns out, someone else on the sanctuary staff saw it and Laurie Goodrich has her description.

I've seen Mississippi kites in some springs over my house in Northampton County, have seen a few on lookouts including one at Hawk Mountain in the fall of 2007 (ver. observers), saw them in Berks County when the swallow-tailed kites were there in 1995, saw the ones at Bull's Island in 2004, and have seen them in Mexico and Texas.

It wasn't a white-tailed kite because it was dark on the underside, its tail wasn't white, and that species is completely unexpected in this part of the country. It wasn't a swallow-tailed kite because of tail shape, underside color, and overall shape and proportion.

There is no photograph. I had no camera and even if I did have one I'm a terrible photographer. I'm an even worse artist so the best way I can describe this bird's flight style would be to refer to page 111 of Dunne, Sibley, and Sutton's "Hawks in Flight."

NOTE FROM LAURIE GOODRICH:

This is a second report of the probable Mississippi Kite sighted by Arlene Koch. Denise Peters, a HMS staff was at South Lookout. Her description of it going down in the trees refers to it disappearing from her angle of view. The ridge line cascades in steps into valley so it is possible to lose sight of a low flying bird behind the trees as it departs from view, even if it stays above trees.

Bird was seen in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Albany Township, Kempton PA.

Denise has training in hawk identification and worked as a hawk counter over five years ago at Montclair Hawk Watch. While, not a current hawk counter she knows the common raptors well.

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From: Denise Peters [mailto:peters@hawkmountain.org]
Sent: Thursday, March 27, 2008 2:46 PM
To: Laurie Goodrich
Subject:

March 26th sighted between 11:40-12 pm at SLO (South Lookout, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Kempton PA)

Bird popped up in front of us low, watched bird fly north low over trees, towards East Rocks, then turned east, but went down into trees and lost sight of it.

Description: Bird appeared very dark in overall color. Did not see any field markings. My original id was based on mostly on shape, but as I watched the flight, I second guessed my id, but didn't come up with another answer. Wings- long, narrow "falcon-like". Tail was shorter and stockier than a falcon, not long and narrow. The bird was flapping quite a bit, but not like a kestrel, not as steady.

I can tell you my reasoning for what birds it wasn't, but I can't tell you positively what it was either. It didn't have the wing shape of the COHA, as I mentioned before the wings were the first thing that struck me b/c they were very slender and pointed. It wasn't a kestrel because the tail was shorter and stocky and the flight behavior just seemed different. It wasn't a harrier because the wingbeats were faster and shallower. If I had to take another shot at ID (not considering a MIKI, I would probably say a merlin because it was so dark and it was just flying differently strange).

There were tuvu's in the sky too, so definitely smaller than those, but it was about crow-sized, that was one of the reasons I disregarded kestrel...size is all relative and when something is moving quick I look at the shape and flight behavior.

I was using Eagle Optics binoculars, 10 x 42. I have seen MIKI's in the field in NM and worked with an adult MIKI on the glove for education programs. I am used to seeing them on the ground while conducting road surveys, not looking down on them from a higher vantage point. It has also been a few years, since I've seen one in the field (2005?). I have been hawkwatching for 7-8 years now, I'm definitely not an expert, but know that the bird I saw wasn't a falcon or kestrel, like I originally thought, it was different. Once I heard Arlene's call of the bird, I immediately thought to myself "maybe it wasn't a kestrel". However, I had no idea of the time that she saw her bird, but I was thinking about this one and having further doubts about it, but normally MIKI is the last bird I'd be thinking about, but thought that it might be right .

Denise Peters
Educator/Naturalist

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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*

Date of Sighting: 26 March 2008 to 26 March 2008

County : BERKS

Location : HAWK MOUNTAIN

Observer(s): Arlene Koch, Denise Peters

Date of Submission: 2008

Submitted by: Arlene Koch, Denise Peters

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
R. Wiltraut			X					
A. Guarente			X					
T. Johnson		X						
B. Coulter		X						
E. Witmer			X					
J. Heller			X					
G. Malosh			X					
TOTALS		2	5					
DECISION			X					

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

8/20/08