

## Mississippi Kite

*Ictinia mississippiensis*

Observer: Jerry McWilliams

Location: Tom Ridge Environmental Center parking lot (Presque Isle Hawk Watch)

Date: May 24, 2012

Time: 10:05 AM

Weather: clear, wind SSE to 15 mph, temp. about 80 F

Viewing distance: Perhaps ½ mile straight overhead at its closest distance from me

Optics: 10 X 40 Zeiss Binoculars and through the Canon camera lens using an F 4 300 mm lens and 1.4 teleconverter, briefly through a Kowa TSN 4 scope at about 35X.

Details: I was watching an approaching Bald Eagle through my spotting scope during the hawk watch waiting for it to get close enough to age, when I spotted a small bird of prey pass directly over the eagle. I quickly turned my attention to the fast flying raptor thinking I could pick up the eagle a little later after I identified this bird. As it got closer I noticed that the wings were down swept, which made me wonder what was coming as it was moving dead on, then it flapped its wings two or three times. I said to Roger Donn, who was spotting next to me, "What the hell is this coming!" The wing flaps reminded me very much of a nighthawk. It was then that I shouted "Mississippi Kite!" It immediately resumed its gliding pattern cruising rapidly in a direct line overhead. As soon as I got Roger on the bird I looked away and grabbed my camera, then had Roger give me directions so I could get on it again. It went by so quickly that I was only able to get a few quick shots of the underside and rear end before it was well past us. It made a couple of quick tight turns then continued on a glide in a NE direction and out of sight. I was able to see the following characteristics. When on a glide it held its wings bowed down a bit with the "hands" of the wings arched up. When it was overhead I could see a rather long dark tail held tightly closed and was the same width throughout its length. The tail tip was slightly notched when it was directly overhead and appeared squared off after it past. The wings were long and narrow throughout, much like a gull and bent back at the wrists. The wing tips looked pointed. The head was short and very pale. The outer primaries and secondaries were pale and the inner primaries were dark, giving a light-dark-light pattern to the remiges. There was a small indentation in about primary 5 or so, which produced a bit of a notch in the wing. The wing linings were pale with a scattering of dark feathers. The body was narrow. The belly was pale gray with some scattered streaking. The closed tail looked all black. It looked superficially as a Peregrine Falcon, but the wings were too long and narrow, the tail was an even width throughout its length and was squared and slightly notched, not tapering and round at the tip, like a Peregrine. The wing beats, like I mentioned earlier, reminded me of a Common Nighthawk, a snappy stiff up and down flap giving it a bit of bounce. There was no tilting or tipping from side to side when it was on glide, but was very steady and direct. The down-curved wings with up-swept tips were quite evident as seen from behind as it flew away. The photographs clearly show this which is a one of the field marks of a Mississippi Kite.

I have seen many Mississippi Kites throughout the south-central U.S. Their flight and shape is quite diagnostic and easily recognizable even at a distance.



