

SQUARE-TAILED KITES BREEDING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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The Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura* is considered very rare in South Australia (Condon 1969), with one breeding record on the Murray River in 1982 (Fraser 1983) and a single, unmated bird at a nest on Eyre Peninsula in 1974 (Cupper & Cupper 1981, Hollands 1984). Therefore it is worth recording the history of up to three pairs that attempted to nest on Eyre Peninsula in the 1960's and early 1970's when I resided in the district. These birds were the ones Cupper & Cupper (1981) and Hollands (1984) searched for; an addled egg from one nest is in the South Australian Museum collection (S.A. Parker, pers. comm.).

One pair (Pair A), first found in November 1960, nested for at least 15 years without success. They reared no young because egg collectors continually robbed the nest, and one adult was eventually shot. Three pairs nested in the area in one year only, either 1968 or 1969. Egg collectors robbed all three nests. Pairs A and B nested 1 km apart, and pair C nested 6-7 km from one of the other pairs. In the following year there were only two pairs, A and C, which nested 6-7 km apart. Pair B did not return.

Pair A nested in a patch of Sugar Gums *Eucalyptus cladocalyx* bisected by a highway. Pairs B and C nested in small patches of open River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis* forest subject to seasonal flooding (although this did not occur when they were nesting). There were thousands of hectares of Sugar Gum hill country, now largely cleared, near the nesting areas. The Kites showed a preference for flat country with woodland near open paddocks which were interspersed with remnant patches of woodland, mallee and She-Oak.

Pair A, but not pairs B and C, always had two or three nests built and lined with leaves. This may be attributable to the regular persecution of pair A. In 1971, pair C hatched two young from a clutch of three eggs. The male was seen flying about or perched in the nest tree, near the nest. The female was always on the nest until the young were well advanced. One prey item was a fledgling

passerine of Grey Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla harmonica* size and appearance (ca 50 g). The legs of a newly hatched Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae* chick were found beneath the nest, but they may have been the result of fox predation. The nestling period at this nest was long, at least nine weeks, and the young fledged in early January 1972. This pair's only successful year was 1971. They were not located in 1972, and in 1974 and 1975 they laid eggs but these were infertile.

No pairs were seen after 1975 and up until I left the district in 1987, but single birds were seen around each of the three nesting areas and one bird was seen in 1988 (D. Story, pers. comm.). They may still attempt to breed in the area as some suitable habitat remains. Square-tailed Kites were not seen in the nesting areas outside the breeding season, which suggests that they were breeding migrants to the district as seems to be the case elsewhere in south-eastern Australia (Debus 1983, Debus & Silveira 1989).

The history of these pairs, as outlined above, suggests that the birds are declining locally in numbers and productivity. The small number of breeding records, intense persecution of nesting birds and the scale of habitat destruction raises concern for the future of the Square-tailed Kite in South Australia. Its prime habitat in the state is (or was) probably the coastal and subcoastal open forests and woodlands, and the tree-lined inland river systems (cf. Debus & Czechura 1989). Its conservation in South Australia will require a survey of its distribution, status and habitat requirements, and the application of appropriate land-management decisions.

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