

A primer on Snail Kites when you only have a minute

Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*)

- One of three snail kite subspecies worldwide.
- 17-19 inches head to tail, with a wing span of about 40 inches; females slightly larger than males.
- Sharply curved bill adapted to extracting Florida apple snails (*Pomacea paludosa*) from their shells; non-snail prey (such as small turtles) occasionally eaten.
- Males slate gray with red eyes and red-orange legs, especially when breeding; females and juveniles predominately brown with light streaks.
- Single contiguous Florida population occupies wetlands from Orlando to the Everglades.
- Federally-listed as an endangered species in 1967.

Biology and Ecology

- Lifespan up to about 20 years.
- Nomadic throughout its range, relying on a network of wetlands.
- Forages for apple snails over grass and sedge-dominated wetlands most often while flying, but also while perched.
- Constructs nests over water in willow and other shrubs and trees in the Everglades, and herbaceous vegetation



Male kite holding apple snail

PHOTO: © ROB BENNETTS



Female snail kite feeding nestlings

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(such as cattail), shrubs, and trees on lakes.

- Estimated minimum of 0.1-0.2 snails/m² to support foraging; snail densities with multiple kites foraging are typically > 0.5 snails/m².
- Adult kites preyed on by great horned owls; eggs and nestlings preyed on by birds, snakes, and raccoons.
- In good years, may fledge 3 or more young; considered a 'boom' or 'bust' (drought year) species.
- Juvenile survival highly variable depending on hydrology and snail availability; annual adult survival rate typically > 0.9.

Threats and Concerns

- Historic population decline associated with wetland habitat loss and alteration.
- Population decline in recent years may be associated with water management, drought, and/or low snail densities.
- Current population estimated at approximately 800 birds.
- The non-native apple snail (*Pomacea insularum*) is spreading in Florida and may pose a threat to native snails and the snail kite.

