

## Square-tailed Kite Breeding near Ararat, Victoria

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Debus & Silveira (1989) reported the Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura* nesting at three or four localities in Victoria (including probably two pairs in the Ballarat-Daylesford area and one at Blackwood). Binns et al. (1991) reported a spring return migration of several Kites through the Ballarat district, in support of the migration hypothesis (e.g. Debus & Silveira 1989), and suggested that those birds may have stopped to breed in the general area. Further to the remarks by Debus (1996a) on breeding Square-tailed Kites possibly being overlooked or misidentified in south-eastern Australia, we here record that a pair of Kites bred on the edge of the Mt Cole Range near Ararat (37°17'S, 142°56'E) in 1994, 1995 and 1996. The site is in state forest: near a picnic ground, virtually over a walking track and 150–200 m from a road.

A Square-tailed Kite was first seen in 1983 when it circled over the driveway (lined with native trees and shrubs) of our rural property, and spent most of the day perched in a eucalypt. Subsequently, a Kite flew over our orchard and dropped a nestling European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* which it had taken from a nest in a pear tree. The nestling was still alive, so it was replaced in the nest that evening. Next morning the whole brood of nestling Goldfinches was gone.

A Kite was seen intermittently through the late 1980s, but no nest was found. In spring 1994 a pair of Kites had a nest on a horizontal branch of a large Manna Gum *Eucalyptus viminalis*, at the Mt Cole Range site which was also near the Langi Ghiran Range. A single young Kite was seen, which survived to fledge. At first the parents spent much time on the nest with the chick, but eventually they visited it less frequently and drifted farther afield between nest visits. During the breeding cycle the Kites preyed on the local small birds (honeyeaters and others) and their young; we found about 12 dead passerine nestlings under the Kites' nest.

In spring 1995 a pair of Kites returned and built a new nest situated on a dead mistletoe at the end of an upright branch of a Blue Gum *E. bicostata*. A pair of Brown Goshawks *Accipiter fasciatus* occupied the 1994 nest. The adult Kites took many local fledgling birds. Gradually the Kites stayed away from the nest for longer periods. A single nestling Kite was seen, but the outcome of their nest was unknown; it appeared unsuccessful, as no young Kite was known to have fledged. The two years had been exceptionally dry, which may have been a factor in the decline of small birds and the possible breeding failure of the Kites in 1995. In that season MB found the leg of a small Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* below the Kites' nest, a prey item possibly fed to the young Kite when fledgling birds were scarce. The 1995 nest was about 30 m from the 1994 nest.

In 1996, on 30 September, a pair of Kites returned and inspected the 1995 nest without any obvious calling or displays. The 1996 season was very late, the weather having been cold and wet, with small birds not yet nesting and eucalypts (Yellow Box *E. melliodora* and Yellow Gum *E. leucoxylon*) not flowering by the end of September. By 1 October the Kites were occupying the 1995 nest, and they started

incubation around 5 October. One hundred millimetres of rain had fallen for each of the previous four months and the area was saturated, but the Kites seemed impervious to the cold, grey, wet or windy days. In anthropomorphic terms they seemed phlegmatic, watching human observers with apparent indifference. Other observers reported that an adult Kite was brooding for 2.5 hours around midday on 4 December, and that two chicks were visible on 8 December. One chick was then mostly downy, with brown feathers emerging on the wings; it defecated over the edge of the nest. At that stage the other downy chick had more brown feathering on its head, back and wings. The adults successfully raised the two young which fledged by mid February 1997, after a breeding cycle lasting four and a half months from the adults' return to their breeding territory. One fledgling appeared to be about a week more advanced in development than the other. Both young returned to feed at the nest for at least a month after fledging.

These observations support the impression that the Square-tailed Kite is a spring breeding migrant to Victoria, with a significant breeding population in the Western Uplands. The 1995-96 nest is another case of the use of a mistletoe on an upright branch (see Debus 1996b). If the chicks were in their third week in early December 1996 (see Marchant & Higgins 1993), hatching would have occurred in the third week of November and incubation was therefore about six weeks.

Our observations were supplemented by those of Ballarat BOC members J. Tansey, H. O'Donnell and T. Crockett, submitted to the RAOU Bird of Prey Watch scheme; their notes were kindly referred to Stephen Debus by Lyle Smith.

## References

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