SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*)

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The White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus)*, formerly known as the Black-shouldered Kite, is commonly seen hovering as it hunts for prey in low elevation areas such as open grasslands, savannas, emergent wetlands, oak woodlands, and certain types of agricultural areas (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Dunk 1995). As White-tailed Kites search for food, they soar, glide, and hover up to 80 feet above the ground, then dive straight down to capture their prey (Warner and Rudd 1975). In the early 1900s, this medium-sized raptor was threatened with extinction in North America, but the California population continues to show signs of recovery in large part due to its designation as a state "fully protected" species, enhanced conservation efforts, and increased agricultural irrigation that provides habitat for its favored prey, the meadow vole (*Microtus californicus*). California is currently considered the breeding range stronghold for this species, occupying nearly all areas along the coast up to the western Sierra Nevada foothills and southeast deserts (Small 1994, Dunk 1995).

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*). *Photo: Hillary White*

The White-tailed Kite typically nests in dense-canopied trees that are situated in close proximity to suitable foraging habitats, especially ungrazed grasslands or alfalfa fields adjacent to riparian habitats that support voles and other small mammals. Because the White-tailed Kite is a non-migratory resident in California, this matrix of riparian corridors and open lands is important to the species throughout the year. They have also been known to form communal night roosts in these wooded habitats.

The primary factors that regulate the White-tailed Kite population are prey availability and suitable nesting areas situated near their foraging grounds (Dunk and Cooper 1994). Lightly grazed or ungrazed fields generally support larger prey populations and appear to be preferred by White-tailed Kites (Johnson and Horn 2008, Pandolfino et al. 2011). The conversion of natural grasslands or compatible agricultural land cover types to development will decrease prey availability. However, wildlife-friendly agricultural practices, such as maintaining areas for prey refugia and encouraging beneficial crops (e.g., alfalfa) and conserving grasslands may provide an adequate source of food for the White-tailed Kite. As demonstrated by a study on California Department of Fish and Wildlife lands where grazing pressure was removed, the management of grasslands to maintain ungrazed areas would benefit prey populations and may consequently increase raptor density (Dunk 1992). Increasing nesting habitat by planting windrows and hedgerows consisting of suitable tree species on field margins could provide nesting habitat, which can otherwise be limited in agricultural landscapes. Encouraging these regional conservation practices can be an effective tool to manage and sustain White-tailed Kite populations in California.

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