

INTRODUCTION

This report reflects information sent in by the public on the form shown on the facing page. The information included herein involves only sightings of the Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) for 1998 in Texas, unless stated otherwise.

A total of 277 kite sightings were reported through this project. In no way does this imply that 277 individuals exist in Texas. There is no feasible way to tag or mark these birds to identify them as individuals, so some individuals were undoubtedly seen and reported more than once. The purpose of this project is not to conduct a census of these birds. Instead, this is a project to: (1) gain some basic information and knowledge in Texas on a declining United States species, (2) give interested and concerned people a project to contribute their efforts towards, and (3) quantify and report sightings on this beautiful and graceful bird.

We are continuing this project for one more year (in 1999), thanks to funds provided by Texas Parks and Wildlife, Temple-Inland Forest, Inc. and the U. S. Forest Service. Please let us know about any Swallow-tailed Kites that you see.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Georgia Partners In Flight, especially E. J. Williams, for their cooperation in a similar project they have in their state. Other states have since followed Georgia and Texas (i.e., Mississippi). Dr. Ken Meyer and Chuck Hunter also contributed information to make this project happen. Thanks to Shelly Scroggs and Craig Scofield, both with TPW, for the GIS map on page 7.

A huge thanks goes to Gael Simons who put in a lot of time and effort from April, 1998 until the compiling was completed in December, 1998. She kept this project very organized and made numerous phone calls, e-mails and mail-outs in addition to spending many hours glued to a computer as our chief database manager.

Layout by Brian McGovern at TPW's Information Services Section. Printed by TPW's Print Shop.

SUBMIT SIGHTINGS ONLINE

The questionnaire is now available on the TPW's web site at <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us>. Go to the Nature page and look under "Birding."

OBSERVERS AND CONTRIBUTORS

We are grateful to the following contributors (almost 100 folks!). Without their willingness to contribute their sightings, this report would not exist. We printed 4,000 pamphlets and distributed them to various public facilities within the range of this species. We received 160 back, which is a 4% return rate. We would like to thank:

Kenneth Alexander, Sarah Alsobrooks, Ronnie and Donna Archer, Helen Arnold, Ron Atchison, Mike Austin, Dick Benoit, Tom Bledsoe, Thad Boudreaux, Loretta Broussard, Ray Brown, Lesley Bursnall, Alvin Cearly, Lanet Coleman, Alice Cornwall, Dan Cornwall, Charles Craddock, Carolyn Cuthbertson, Rich Damron, David Dauphin, Glen Duggan, Mr. and Mrs. K.W. Eikenhorst, Lee Elliott, Harry Elliott, Paul Fagula, Tony and Phyllis Frank, Dennis Franklin, Stuart R. Gary, Gay Gilbert, G.R. Goodall, Peter Gottschling, Andrew Hamlett, Mary Hannigan, Michele Hannon, Keith Hansen, Peggy Harding, Raymon L. Hedges, Rhandy Helton, Jose Hernandez, Charles Hilton, Petra Hockey, Michael Hoke, Carroll Holt, Ken Howard, Charles Hughes, Glen Monroe Irby, Shelley Jones, Paula Kennedy, Nancy Kirschbaum, Dan Leger, Robert and Kay Lookingbill, Rob Malone, Mary Jo Martin, Suzanne McCandless, Mark McQueary, Jim and Pat McKinley, Ray Milentz, Kelly Mizell, Gretchen Mueller, Jenna Mueller, John Muldrow, Andy Newman, Brent Ortego, June Osborne, David Paling, John Parsons, R.L. Patterson, Mendy Rabicoff, George Regmund, Listen Rice, Richard Rosche, Bob Row, Rod Rylander, Cliff Shackelford, Jim Smith, Steven Spenser, Mark Steuer, Murt Sullivan, Shannon Tompkins, Judy Travis, Gary Waggener, Bill Wagner, Ron Weeks, Matt Whitbeck, Mary Sue Williams, Clayton Wolf, Roy Zipp. A special *thanks* goes to Dick Benoit who, while doing various hawk watches, sighted 41 out of the 277 individuals reported in 1998. That's almost 15% of all the kites reported to the project.

NOTES ABOUT SOME OF THE CONTRIBUTORS

- Loretta Broussard of Chevron kept people informed about these kites in her area (Orange County) by writing about them in Chevron's Employee Newsletter called *Shades of Orange*.
- Mendy Rabicoff heard that Temple-Inland Forest was a partner on this survey and he wrote that he was very excited and happy to help.
- Several sightings were received from people not necessarily looking for kites, but who were told of this project by U.S. Forest Service personnel.
- Rich Damron was in the right place at the right time when the young birds fledged the nest in Orange County. He described their attempts to stay on a branch, right side up. One adult was bringing food while the other adult watched from nearby.
- Dick Benoit counted 19 Swallow-tailed Kites in one group. He did a Sylvan Beach "unofficial" hawk watch on his own for roughly 5 hours per day for 31 observation days (151 hours of total observation) from March 8 to May 10.
- While conducting a Breeding Bird Survey in Newton County, Cliff Shackelford and Ray Brown saw a tight flock of seven kites at one of their survey stops. This was the largest flock seen away from the coast.

WHY THE INTEREST IN THIS SPECIES?

Both the range and numbers in the U.S. of the Swallow-tailed Kite have been greatly reduced. A partnership that began in 1998 between Texas Partners in Flight, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Temple-Inland Forest and the U.S. Forest Service has identified this species as needing conservation attention. Outdoor enthusiasts such as birders, hikers, hunters, anglers and the general public can help in determining the distribution and concentrations of these kites in Texas by filling out the survey form and sending it to Texas Partners in Flight, 4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744.

WHAT DO THESE BIRDS LOOK LIKE AND WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

There are three species of kites regularly found in Texas (Swallow-tailed, Mississippi and White-tailed kites), plus a fourth one (Hook-billed Kite) found only along the Lower Rio Grande Valley and a fifth one (Snail Kite) that has been found once or twice and is considered an accidental. None of them is as elegant as the Swallow-tailed Kite. This species is rarely misidentified due to their size, striking appearance, and graceful aerial displays. During the day, they are typically seen flying low over treetops in search of small vertebrates or diving in pursuit of flying insects over open areas. The silhouette is distinctive with long, pointed wings and a deeply forked tail. Swallow-tailed Kites rarely flap their wings but continuously rotate their tail, sometimes nearly 90 degrees. When flying into the wind, they seem to hang motionless. Recently fledged birds have very short, stubby "scissors." Males and females are indistinguishable by plumage or size.

The species' best distinguishing features include:

- striking black-and-white plumage
- deeply forked tail
- long, narrow, pointed wings that allow them to have graceful, extraordinary flight
- medium-sized raptor about 24" body length and 48" wing span
- inhabits bottomland forests and associated open lands (marshes, fields, cutovers, open freshwater, etc.)

In the U.S., the Swallow-tailed Kite currently nests only in the states along the Gulf Coast and other adjacent states; this is less than half of its historical breeding range in the U.S. Occasionally, these kites are seen statewide in Texas during spring and fall migration as well as all along the Gulf Coast. When nesting in Texas, Swallow-tailed Kites are most likely to be seen near large rivers, particularly the lower Trinity, lower Neches and lower Sabine river watersheds and associated bottomland hardwood forests. It is believed that they breed from mid-March through the end of June only in the southeast part of the

state where preferred habitat exists. It is also believed that the Swallow-tailed Kites nesting in Texas migrate each fall south to the Coastal Prairies and then, surprisingly, head east along the Gulf to Florida. They then *island hop* down to the wintering grounds in South America. Like all migrating raptors, this species rides the thermals that are only produced over land so they do not cross the Gulf waters for long distances. Therefore, it is a circum-Gulf migrant versus a trans-Gulf migrant (the latter is a group which includes most warblers, vireos, buntings, etc.).

THERE IS A CASH REWARD

Temple-Inland Forest has offered a \$500 cash reward for the breeding seasons of 1998-1999 for anyone that can lead the principal investigators to a nest. The nest must be active and unharrassed. If on private land, a signed letter from the landowner must be obtained for access and clearance as well as for revealing the location of the nest. A sighting of the bird is still important to us, so there is a tremendous need for all sightings; these might help us determine areas of concentration or migration paths used by this bird. Only a confirmed and active nest at a previously undiscovered site receives the cash reward. In order to avoid any negative impact to the nest area, it is recommended that a minimal number of approaches are made to the immediate nest area. This will ensure against nest abandonment by the adult birds. If the nest is verified and documented by one of the principal investigators, the reward will be delivered to the person(s) helping to identify nest locations and respecting the sensitivity of the nest while in use. This reward can be divided or donated to a conservation organization. If you know the location of a nest, please contact Texas Partners In Flight at 512/389-4970.

Before this project, there were only three documented nests in Texas since c.1911: 1994 in Tyler County (discovered by Ray Brown and Howard Williamson) and 1996 and 1997 (the same site) in Chambers County (discovered by Grady and Lu Skillern). Word of this project produced the fourth and latest known nest of this species in Texas. This nest, surprisingly, was found on a high school campus in Orange County in April, 1998 and a Temple-Inland check for \$500 was awarded to their Future Farmers of America (FFA) program. For a look at a video news (media) release on this great story produced by TPW, check out this web site: <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/news/tv/tvnews.htm>.

SELECTED READING

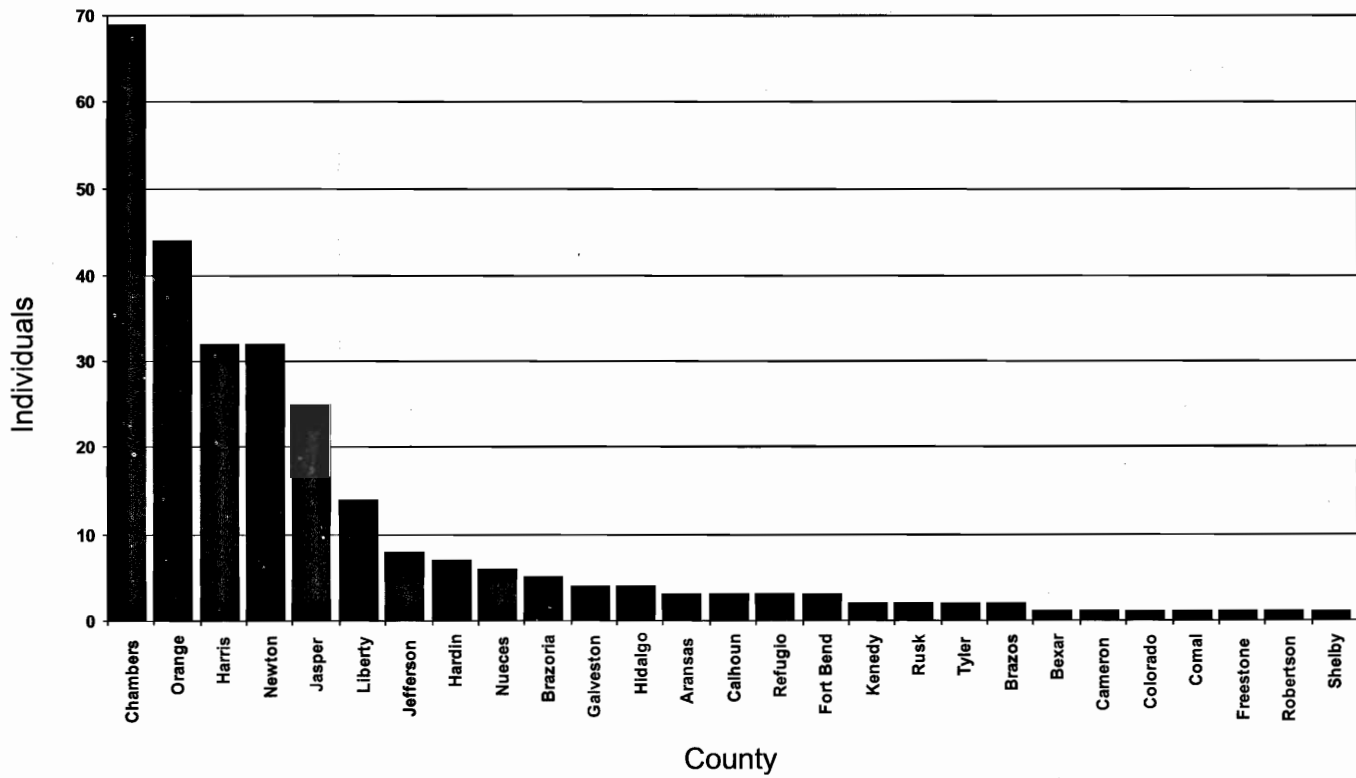
(For information on the natural history and biology of this bird)

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- Kilham, L. 1980. Pre-nesting behavior of the Swallow-tailed Kite, including interference by an unmated male with a breeding pair. *J. Raptor Res.* 14:29-31.
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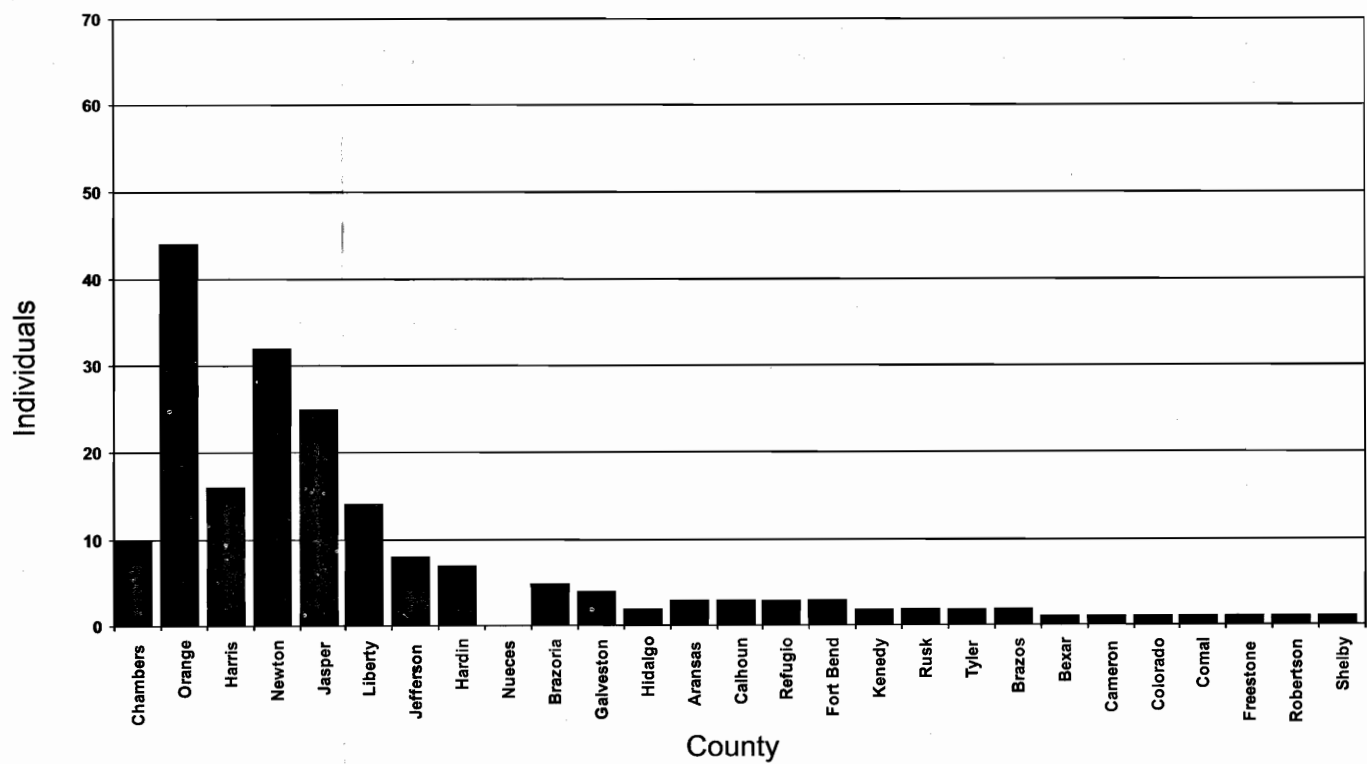
* the References section in this publication is very thorough and inclusive.

LOCATION OF SIGHTINGS BY COUNTY

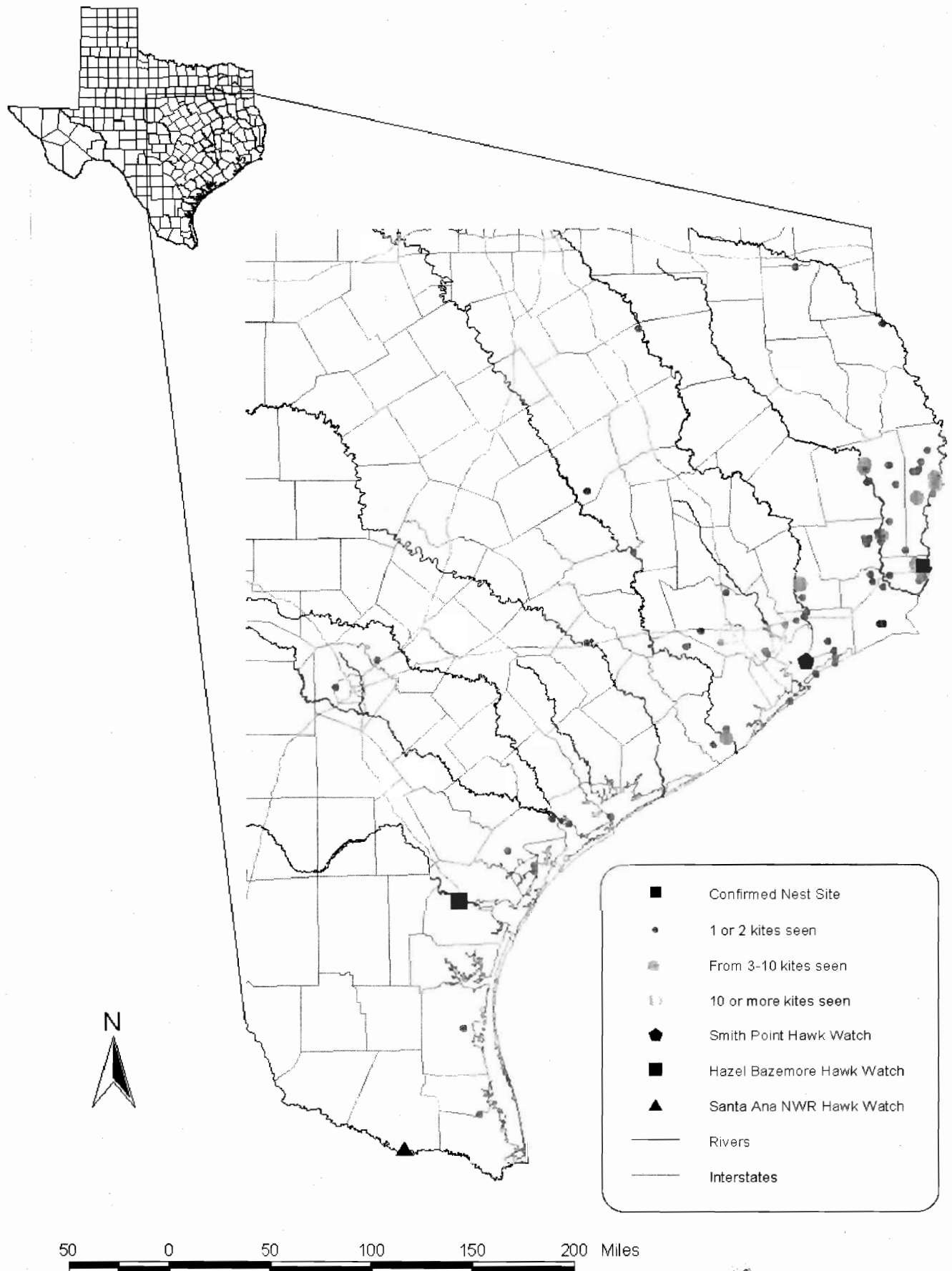
Including Hawk Watches



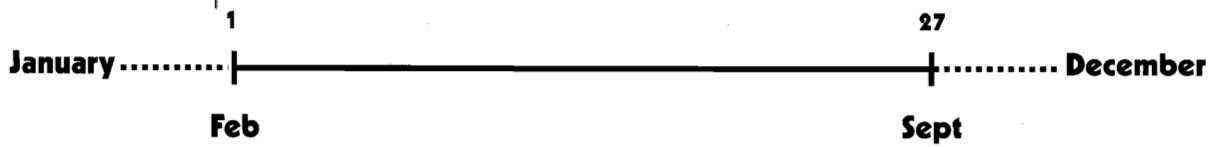
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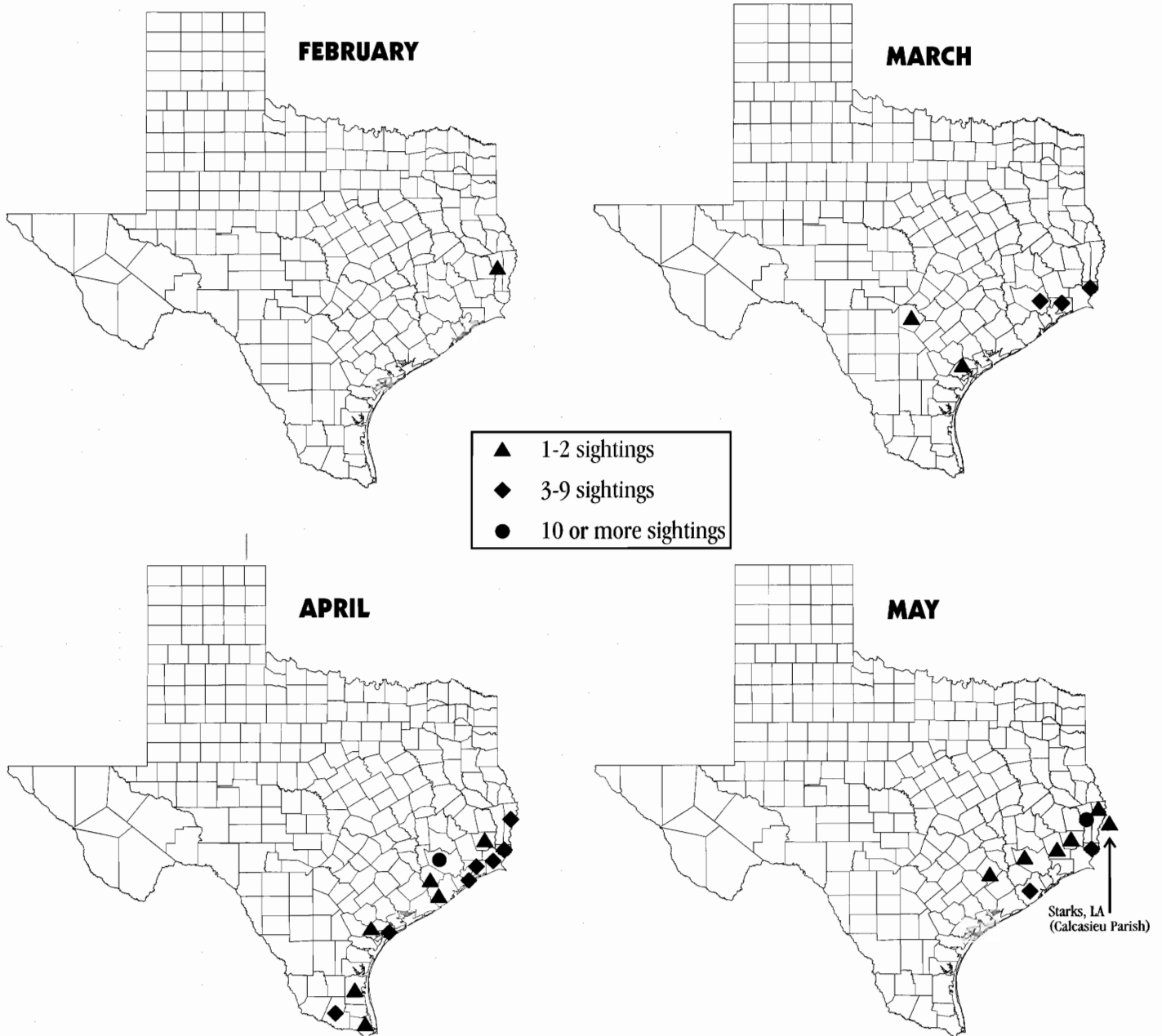
SWALLOW-TAILED KITE SIGHTINGS FOR 1998



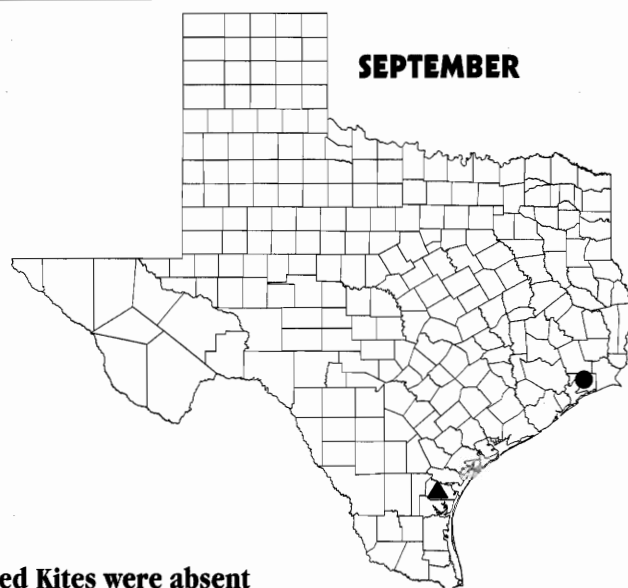
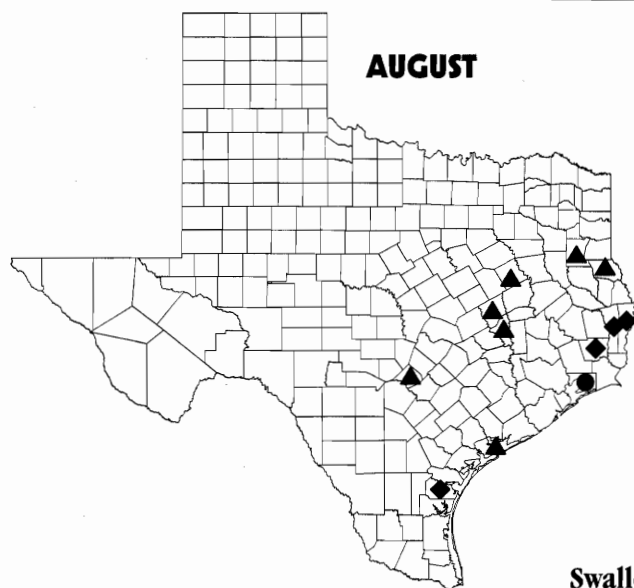
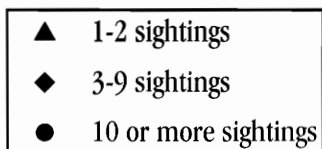
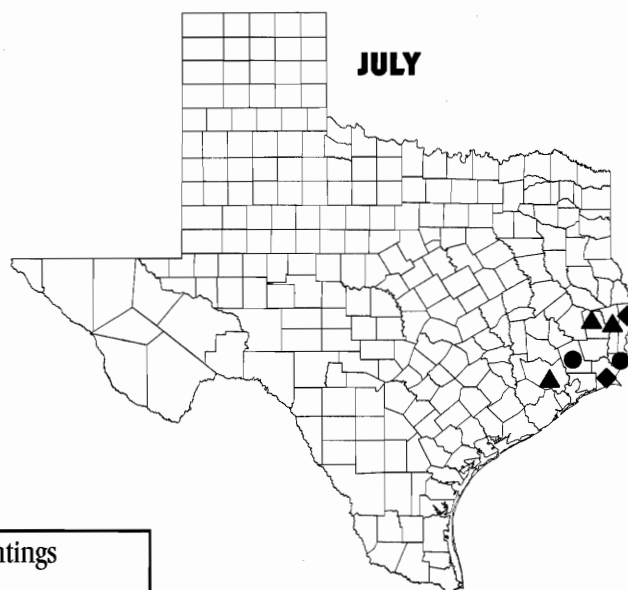
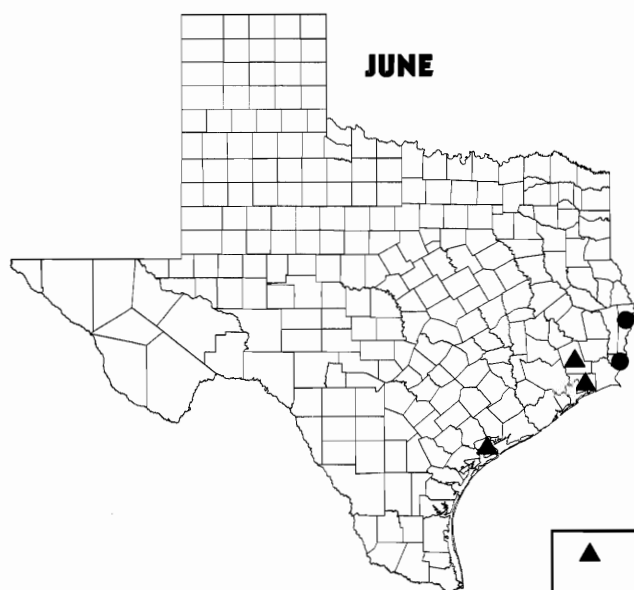
THE EARLIEST AND LATEST DATES OF SIGHTINGS REPORTED IN 1998 IN TEXAS



KITE SIGHTINGS BY MONTH



KITE SIGHTINGS BY MONTH



Swallow-tailed Kites were absent
from Texas: October through January

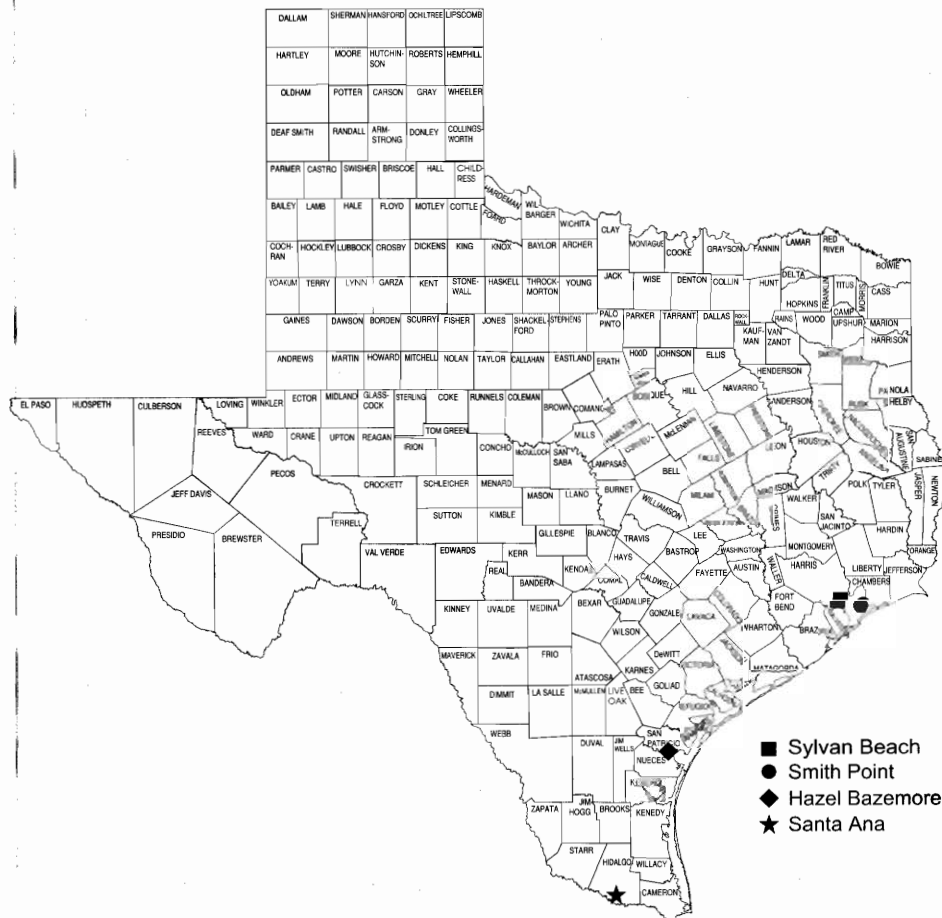
OFFICIAL HAWK WATCHES

There were three official Hawk Watches this fall:

- Smith Point at Candy Abshire Wildlife Management Area near Anahuac with 59 kites seen (21% of the kites reported to this project).
- Hazel Bazemore near Corpus Christi with 6 kites seen (2% of the kites reported to this project).
- Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge near McAllen with 2 kites seen (less than one percent of the kites reported to this project).
- "Sylvan Beach" (an unofficial hawk watch site, but an important site in La Porte in Harris County reported by Dick Benoit) with 16 kites seen (roughly 6% of the kites reported to this project).

For more information on the hawk watches in Texas, try

<http://www.electrotex.com/aoc/hawkwatch.htm>



RESULTS FROM 1998

A total of 277 Swallow-tailed Kite individuals was submitted to this project in 1998. Detailed information appears in the Appendix.

- The three earliest dates were: February 1, March 4 and 14.
- The three latest dates **away** from a Fall Hawk Watch were: 26, 28 and 30 of August.
- The three latest dates **at** a Fall Hawk Watch were: 19, 26 and 27 of September.

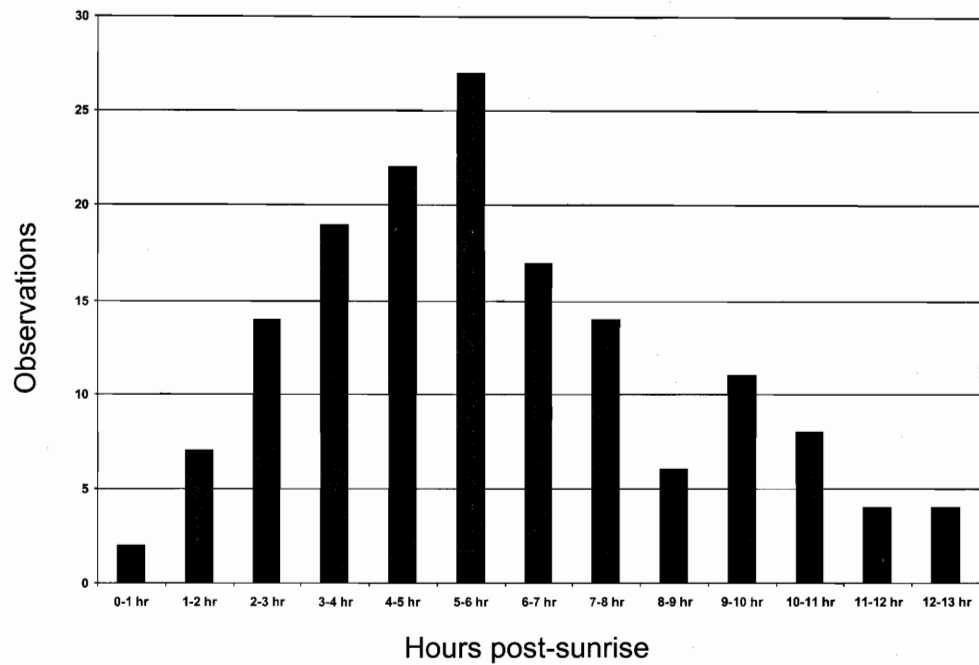
INTERESTING STATISTICS

- Only 4% of the birds reported were seen as they were perched, while the remaining 96% were seen in flight.
- Less than 6% of the birds reported were seen carrying items, either food or nest material.
- Observers averaged 1.7 kites per sighting (away from the hawk watches):
 - 64% of sightings involved a single kite,
 - 22% of sightings involved two kites,
 - 8% of sightings involved three kites,
 - 6% of sightings involved four to seven kites, and
 - only one sighting involved a group of more than seven kites (a tight, circling flock of 19 kites at Sylvan Beach in Harris County by Dick Benoit)

NESTING FACTS ON SWALLOW-TAILED KITES IN TEXAS

- Nest building and initiation: starts in mid- to late March
- Egg-laying and incubation: may begin from late March through early May; incubation lasts 28-32 days
- Nestling period: from approximately late April to mid-June; lasts about 35 days from time of hatching to flying
- Fledging period: young leave nest in May or June, depending on date of initiation, no nests are expected to still be active after the first of July

TIME OF DAY OF SIGHTINGS



NUMBER OF SWALLOW-TAILED KITES SEEN PER OBSERVATION

