

UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS NATURAL RESERVE

WHITE-TAILED KITE



Dajung Chung

Scientific Name: *Elanus leucurus*
Common Name: White-tailed Kite
Global Rarity: Secure
U.S. or State listing: Vulnerable/
Apparently Secure; California Department
of Fish and Wildlife Fully Protected Species
UCSC Rarity: Rare



General Description

The White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) is a small to medium raptor easily identified by its white body, black shoulders, and distinct hovering behavior which some say resembles a kite. During non-breeding seasons, these kites can be found communally roosting with as many as 100 others at key roosting sites. Much research has been published on its foraging ecology; however, less is known about its breeding, habitat, demography, and genetics.

Identification

Plumage: White plumage on head, neck, back, breast/stomach, and tail with dark, black/gray plumage on shoulders and underside of wrists. Juveniles have a light brown to cinnamon wash on their breast and crown and mottled gray/brown on back

Size: Length: 12.6"-15"; Wingspan: 39"-43.3"

Shape: Short tail, small head, long wings

Unique Characteristics: Characteristic behavior of hovering or flapping wings in place (kiting) to survey grounds as they hunt

Geographic Range

White-tailed Kites are typically non-migratory residents found commonly along the coast and inland parts of California, with the exclusion of deserts and taller mountain ranges. They can also be found in portions of Oregon, Texas, Florida, and down through portions of Mexico and Central and South America. A closely-related species, the Black-shouldered Kite, can be found within Africa, Europe, and Asia.



UCSC Distribution

White-tailed Kites can be found year-round on the UCSC campus, where they are routinely seen hunting in south campus grasslands. Pairs have nested in several locations and there are occasionally winter communal roosts in the forests of Upper Campus.



Life history

Habitat: Commonly found in low elevation grasslands, open woodlands, savannas, marshes, wetlands, and cultivated/agricultural fields. Habitat differs from breeding and non-breeding range. Micro-habitats include ungrazed grasslands, wetlands dominated by grass, and fence rows and irrigation ditches adjacent to grazed lands. They nest in the upper third of trees that may be 10-160 feet tall (both isolated or forested trees).

Reproduction: Pairs found together year-round, but most are paired Dec. to Aug. Courtship behaviors are typically seen Dec. to Sept. Nest building from Jan. to Aug.

Behavior: Roosts with other White-tailed Kites during non-breeding season in groups as large as 100, but commonly roosts with 10 to 40 individuals. Small territories are defended year round.

Diet: They will commonly flap to hover in place and scan the ground for small mammal prey such as the California vole, though occasionally they will eat birds, insects, or lizards.

Predators: Red-tailed Hawks, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon (not at UCSC), and Great Horned Owls. Predators of eggs include American Crows, Common Ravens, and small-to-medium sized carnivores.

Research Highlights and Fun Facts

- Males bring nest materials of twigs, grass, or leaves and females arrange them.
- They hunt by hovering 5-25 meters above ground, but can go as high as 80 m.
- Types of display flights include flutter and v-flutter flights.



Juvenile

Conservation Status
California Fully Protected
Species



Threats

Statewide:

The White-tailed Kite is threatened across the state by:

1. Habitat loss:

“A significant threat to populations, especially loss of nest trees and foraging habitat. Within 0.8 km radii circles centered on nests, successful nests were surrounded by more natural vegetation and non-urban human development (e.g., abandoned farms, vacant lots, cemetery) than failed nests” (Erichsen et al. 1996).

UCSC campus:

At UCSC, the White-tailed Kite is threatened by:

1. Development in foraging and nesting habitats.
2. Disturbance at nesting or communal roosting sites.



Ways you can help

In your community:

1. Support conservation of grasslands and wetlands.
2. Do not disturb nest sites.



References and Photo Credits

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