

AT HEADLANDS STATE PARK: THE WHITE-TAILED KITE**Donald Shephard**

White-tailed
Kite adult.

Photo by
Kevin L. Cole

Take a walk with me along Heeser Drive starting at Lansing and going around to Lake Street, we will likely see a pair of White-tailed Kites hunting, especially in early morning or late evening. The kite thrills us by soaring up to meet the sea breeze and hovering while searching the grass below. Our careful observation will reveal they remain in the same position for about a minute with a number of possible results: a descent to a lower level to hover; a flight to hunt elsewhere; a dive to capture prey; an interaction with another bird; or, a return to a perch.

When diving to capture prey, kites descend at an almost vertical angle, which they may modify in speed and direction. The legs hang down until the hunter dips to between ten and three feet from the ground. Then the kite increases its dive speed by bending the body forward, raising the tail, and tucking the legs under, while keeping the wings upright to control balance. If successful, the kite emits a series of

rasping sounds we can hear a hundred yards away.

Black shoulders and dangling legs on a hovering, white bird diagnose this species along with the decidedly rounded tail and long, pointed wings with a span of about 40 inches. The White-tailed Kite has a short, dark, hooked beak, red eyes, gray wings and back, under-wings gray with a dark patch at the bend. The hovering kite holds its wings high, beating them slowly with short strokes, its tail and legs down. That posture accounts for naming the child's toy after this master of hovering.

As we descend the north end of Heeser Drive, we pass a favorite roosting post for a juvenile bird. Young White-tailed Kites sport a buff colored wash over much of their bodies and the forehead shows white with a mostly cinnamon crown. A warm brown streaks the back and breast of young birds and they show a dark band at the tip of the white tail and yellow eyes.

In January, the adolescent bird undergoes the last of the molt and renews the scapulars, the area where the upper wing joins the body, and the retrices or tail feathers. The youngster is practically an adult by spring.

As we proceed around the corner where the sea birds roost on the offshore rocks, we may witness a kite dive. Field mice, wood rats, pocket gophers, ground squirrels, shrews, small birds, small snakes, lizards, frogs, grasshoppers, beetles and other insects make up the varied menu for our avian companion. Like owls and other birds of prey, the White-tailed Kite regurgitates a pellet. Analysis of the pellet would likely show that field mice constitute the main diet.

The Mendocino Headlands State Park provides typical grassland habitat for this bird as does the Point Cabrillo Light Station where you will find another pair hunting. In each location the White-tailed Kite builds its twig nest in the tops of trees or shrubs at the edge of the foraging area. They line the nest with grasses, weed stems, rootlets, Spanish Moss, or strips of bark.

Juvenile White-tailed Kite Hovering.



Photo by Len Blumin

You will notice that the Northern Harriers, that hunt the same grounds in low swoops across the grass, enjoy immunity from the kite's aggression to other hawks and ravens. Perhaps this hostility results because kite nests, while concealed from the ground, are vulnerable to flying predators.

As we approach the corner of Heeser Drive and Lake Street, watch and listen. With luck, we will see a successful hunter and hear it call its mate from the nest. The hunter hovers as the nest minder approaches below, flips its body upside down and grabs the offered mouse before

returning to the nest. The Northern Harrier completes a similar exchange without the hover. As their paths cross, the male harrier drops the prey, which the female grabs in midair and takes to feed the young.

The ability to hover gives the White-tailed Kite an advantage today but not so in the past. Arthur Cleveland Bent called this species abundant prior to 1870 in the middle districts of California and the coast. After 1900, various cartridge companies held gun club hunts to exterminate owls, hawks and crows. Kites, because of that habit of hovering, became widely shot by hunters, gamekeepers and ranchers. Rigid protection by law and exemption from collecting permits resulted in a resurgence of this hovering rodent control that benefits the people who persecuted it. Now, we will leave the hunting ground of the White-tailed Kite and walk up Lake Street to contemplate that, indeed, to fly is avian but to hover is divine. What a lovely walk.