



## Black Kite

Swartwou

*Milvus migrans migrans* and *M. m. lineatus*

Black Kites are summer nonbreeding migrants to southern Africa from the Palearctic. Studies of museum specimens have shown that two subspecies migrate to the region: *M. migrans migrans* from Europe, North Africa and eastward to the Kirgiz Steppes and Baluchistan, and *M. m. lineatus* which breeds east of nominate *migrans*, in Transbaikalia, south to Transcaspia, Kazakhstan, the Himalayas and northern China (Clancey 1980b). However, ringing records have yet to establish the exact provenance of migrants to southern Africa, and the comparative abundance of each subspecies in southern Africa is not known.

Black Kites are less abundant than the Yellowbilled Kite *M. m. parasitus* which breeds in the Afrotropics. In the Transvaal, Tarboton & Allan (1984) reported it to be about three times less numerous than the Yellowbilled Kite, while atlas reporting rates for the latter subspecies are higher by about sixfold. Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr (1994c) considered Black Kites to be decidedly uncommon in Botswana and estimated a ratio of one Black to 500 Yellowbilled Kites. A proportion of atlas records may refer to Yellowbilled Kites, because juveniles of the latter species also have dark bills and resemble Black Kites in several other features of plumage and jizz, and often move around in flocks like Black Kites. To what degree problems of identification have influenced reporting rates is unknown, but the presence of Black Kites may be considerably overestimated in the region.

Atlas data show it to be most regularly reported over the central and northern Transvaal and Zimbabwe, with reporting rates at 5–10% and above. Elsewhere, in the northern Cape Province and over much of Botswana, Namibia and KwaZulu-Natal, the Black Kite is relatively uncommon and irregular. The complete absence of records from the southern Cape Province and large parts of Botswana is surprising for such an itinerant and wide-ranging bird, and is probably attributable to regional observer expectations.

Both species/races are sometimes seen together in the same flocks which occasionally number hundreds or even thousands of birds. Such aggregations, and the long periods spent in flight while searching for food, make these birds conspicuous.

**Habitat:** The Black Kite has been recorded in a wide range of habitats, but is most associated with fairly open woodlands. Reporting rates from grasslands and desert regions were much lower. It frequents rubbish dumps and sewage works and many birds systematically fly along roads searching for road kills and other prey.

**Movements:** It arrives in southern Africa from October onwards. In Zimbabwe, it is usually present in large flocks during the first half of summer, numbers apparently subsequently declining as the flocks break up or push further south and west (Irwin 1981). Movements within southern Africa are largely nomadic because birds move around in search of dense concentrations of prey, such as emergences of termites after the passage of rain fronts.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Irwin (1981) argued that it is likely to have increased in numbers during the 20th century in southern Africa, food perhaps being more available as a consequence of greater numbers of people producing more offal and other wastes. As a scavenging species, however, the Black Kite is vulnerable to poisoning (Tarboton & Allan 1984). Populations in some parts of Europe have decreased in recent decades (Cramp *et al.* 1980).

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Recorded in 662 grid cells, 14.6%

Total number of records: 1999

Mean reporting rate for range: 3.4%

### Reporting rates for vegetation types



