

A BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE SIGHT RECORD FOR VANCOUVER ISLAND

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In the early morning of April 21, 1992, I watched an adult Black-shouldered Kite (Elanus caeruleus) hovering over a dry, grassy field behind my Cresswell Road property in North Saanich, near Sidney, B.C. The time was 6:05 A.M. and the sky was clear. There was no wind, and there was a light frost on the ground. Viewing conditions were very good, with the light behind me. The bird, about 110 metres distant, was seen against a background of green deciduous trees. With the aid of a 7x50 binocular and a 22x scope, I watched it for about 20 to 30 seconds. The bird hovered, giving me front, side, and back views, the front view being the briefest. The area over which the bird hunted is an uncut, grassy field with much old, dead grass which had fallen over and with hawthorns (Crataegus sp.), Himalayan blackberries (Rubus discolor), and other small trees and shrubs scattered thinly throughout. The surrounding area is agricultural, with many open fields, including the closely cut fields of the Victoria International Airport.

The bird was approximately crow-sized. The forehead and face were white, the nape and back gray. The pointed wings were gray on the upper surface, with large, solid black shoulder patches in the patagial region, but extending well onto the wing coverts. The undersurface of the wings appeared to be white. The tail was longish-- longer than that of a Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis), but shorter than that of a Northern Harrier (Circus cyaneus). Viewed from the dorsal surface, the outer rectrices (tail feathers) were white, and the inner rectrices light gray. They seemed to be a lighter gray than the back, but this could have been an illusion. The underside of the tail was white, as were the chin, throat, breast, belly, and undertail coverts. No details of the soft parts were seen, and no vocalizations were heard.

I had previously seen Black-shouldered Kites in Arizona, Oregon, and Kenya in 1988 and 1989. Because of the unique field marks of this species, I did not consult any reference books at the time of the sighting. The National Geographic Society field guide (Scott et al. 1983) was used later to check the tail coloration. This description was written from notes made immediately following the observation.

When I first noticed it, the kite was hovering, with wings held high, about 10 metres above the ground. It made a vertical drop toward the ground, and without alighting, rose vertically to a lesser height, perhaps 9 metres, hovered again, descended again, repeated the procedure a third time, folded its wings, and then landed. I was unable to see it on the ground because of the intervening vegetation.

When the bird did not rise from the field within a few seconds, I went to the phone and contacted several other local birders. During this period, the kite apparently left. I walked down the field with the first birder to arrive, but we did not

flush the kite. It was not seen by anyone else on this day, to my knowledge, and I was not able to take a photograph.

This is the first reported sighting of a Black-shouldered Kite on Vancouver Island, and only the third for British Columbia and Canada. (A previously published sighting from North Delta on June 5, 1990 (Siddle 1990) has subsequently been withdrawn by the observer.) The first Canadian sighting was one at the Reifel Bird Sanctuary near Vancouver on April 26, 1990 (Smith and Ireland 1992), also a one-day sighting. Black-shouldered Kites have been extending their range northward from California through Oregon and Washington (Eisenmann 1971, Henny and Annear 1978, Harrington-Tweit 1980, Anderson and Batchelder 1990), rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s and more slowly since then. However, it seems likely that further sightings will be made in south coastal British Columbia, and even that the species may breed here in future.

LITERATURE CITED

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Five days after the above sighting, on April 26, 1992, another Black-shouldered Kite was reported from the Colwood area, only 24 km from the Cresswell Road locality. This sighting very likely involved the same bird. Detailed notes were recorded on the April 26 sighting as well, and both sightings are currently under review by the BCFO Records Committee.