

the NATURALIST CORNER

Brought to you by Peggy Potts
Coastal Master Naturalist
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Majestic Beauty The Swallow-tailed Kite

As a graduate of the Coastal Master Naturalist Program offered through the Clemson University Cooperative Extension, I would like to share my excitement and enthusiasm about the many wonders of nature that can be enjoyed and experienced in the lowcountry. Through this monthly column, I will share my observations, sightings, and characteristics about a variety of nature topics, such as common insects, migrating birds and butterflies, wildflowers and plants and more. Basically, anything in nature is fair game to learn about and explore.

I also encourage you to share your observations and experiences so that we can learn about our natural world together. Please feel free to send in pictures and/or information of anything you find interesting by emailing me, Peggy Potts, at ppotts@charlestoncounty.org.



Most folks would agree that one of the most majestic birds of prey is the Swallow-tailed Kite. It has a small pure white head and underside, short beak,

and long narrow black wings and tail. It's most distinctive feature is the fork shaped black tail feathers. It measures about 19 to 26 inches with a wingspan of around 48 inches and weighs about one pound.

It rarely perches during the day and eats its food in flight, feeding mostly on insects, such as wasps and dragonflies. But it also eats rodents, tree frogs, lizards, snakes, and small nesting birds. It plucks them right from their nests or from the limbs of trees.

The Swallow-tailed Kite usually lays one to three eggs with a nest site in a tall tree in open woodland areas and forested wetlands, usually in pine trees and sometimes cypress, water tupelo, and sweetgum trees. The nest is usually placed around 60' above ground on a platform of small sticks, lined with Spanish moss.



Swallow-tailed Kites can be spotted over swamps, marshes, and large rivers in the southeastern U.S.

The most amazing feature of this bird is its ability to glide through the air without appearing to flap its wings. Its narrow tail is used to guide its movements through the air. It appears to be soaring, dipping, twisting and swooping without any effort. They can be spotted in the spring or summer in the Southeast.

They migrate in both spring and fall. At the end of summer, all Swallow-tailed Kites in the U.S. leave and migrate south to South America.

It's exciting to spot a Swallow-tailed Kite because it is listed by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) as an endangered species due to loss of habitat (wetlands) and drainage. Birders love to observe their striking silhouette as they put on a spectacular show in the sky.

(To hear the podcast of this article go to greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org under "News & Events," "Naturalist Corner")



Charleston County Greenbelt Program

The Greenbelt Program has protected sites where Swallow-tailed Kites might be observed, such as the Francis Marion National Forest. The Greenbelt program provided funding for several properties in the Forest. For additional information, visit the Greenbelt Programs website at <http://greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org> and don't forget to follow us on the Greenbelt Programs Facebook page. When you visit any of our sites, take a picture and post it to Instagram using the hashtag #ccgreenbelt.