

USE OF RED MANGROVE FOR NESTING BY SNAIL KITES IN FLORIDA

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Various aspects on reproduction of the endangered Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) have been studied throughout its range in the United States since the late 1960s. While several substrates have been documented, including both woody and herbaceous plants, the relative use of a nesting substrate varies between areas and among years (Snyder et al. 1989, Sykes et al. 1995). Commonly used woody plants include: coastal plain willow (*Salix caroliniana*), pond apple (*Annona glabra*), baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*), pondcypress (*T. ascendens*), punktree (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*), sweetbay (*Magnolia virginiana*), red bay (*Persea borbonia*), wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), button-bush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), and coco plum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*). Herbaceous species include: sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*), cattail (*Typha* spp.), giant bulrush (*Scirpus validus*), and reed (*Phragmites australis*) (Nicholson 1926; Howell 1932; Stieglitz and Thompson 1967; Sykes 1987a,b; Beissinger 1988; Bennetts et al. 1988; Snyder et al. 1989; Sykes et al. 1995; Bennetts and Kitchens 1997). Although Snail Kites use a variety of nesting substrates, there has been no published mention of use of red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) as a nesting substrate.

During 1999 we monitored Snail Kite nesting activity throughout central and south Florida as part of an ongoing study from 1995 to 1999 evaluating the influences of environmental variation on the demography of the Florida population of Snail Kites. We discovered three nests in red mangrove built approximately 2 m above water. These nests were located in the stairstep unit of Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park, south of Hwy 441 in Lostman's Slough.

Red mangrove is a woody species that in the southern peninsula of Florida occurs from saltwater inland to near-coastal freshwater within the mangrove fringes (Mitsch and Gosselink 1993). The occurrence of red mangrove as a nesting substrate for Snail Kites is ambiguous for interpretations of shifts in habitat quality. The Snail Kite is a highly nomadic species that moves frequently throughout its range in central and south Florida (Bennetts and Kitchens 1997) and has been seen in mangrove fringes (B. Robertson, pers. comm.). Since 1995, Snail Kites have been reported to nest in the stairstep unit (Bennetts and Kitchens 1997), however, they have never been documented to nest in red mangroves prior 1999.

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