Slovak Raptor Journal 2012, 6: 27–30. DOI: 10.2478/v10262-012-0062-y.

VERSITA

First observation of the black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* in Slovakia

Prvé pozorovanie luniaka sivého *Elanus caeruleus* na Slovensku

Radovan VÁCLAV

Abstract: The details and circumstances of the first observation of the black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* in Slovakia are described in the article. An adult individual of the nominate subspecies of the black-winged kite, in the age of at least two years, was observed on August 15, 2012 in the Žitavský luh Nature Reserve, SW Slovakia. Behavioural and ecological information pertaining to the observation are provided, including weather conditions prevailing in the region immediately before the observation day.

Abstrakt: V príspevku sú popísané detaily a okolnosti prvého pozorovania luniaka sivého *Elanus caeruleus* na Slovensku. Dospelý jedinec nominátneho poddruhu luniaka sivého, vo veku minimálne dvoch rokov života, bol pozorovaný 15. augusta 2012 na lokalite PR Žitavský luh v JZ časti Slovenska. Popísané sú etologické prejavy jedinca, ekologické okolnosti pozorovania, ako aj okolnosti pozorovania s ohľadom na regionálne poveternostné podmienky pred dňom pozorovania luniaka.

Key words: *Elanus caeruleus*, nominate subspecies, weather conditions, vagrant, vole year

Radovan Václav, Institute of Zoology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Dúbravská cesta 9, SK–845 06 Bratislava, Slovakia. E-mail: Radovan.Vaclav@savba.sk.

Acknowledgements: Information on sightings of the black-winged kite in Europe was collected at the web site www.tarsiger.com. This contribution is the result of project implementation by the Center of Excellence for Protection and Use of Landscape and Biodiversity (ITMS 26240120014) supported by the Research & Development Operational Programme funded by the ERDF.

Introduction

The black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* is a widespread, small raptor, with the nominate subspecies distributed in Africa, SW Arabia and SW Europe (Cramp & Simmons 1980). The *Elanus* kites inhabit savannas, open woodlands and dry grasslands in arid and temperate zones (Brown & Amadon 1968). The three highly resembling species, the black-shouldered kite *Elanus axillaris* (Australia), the white-tailed kite *Elanus leucurus* (Americas) and the black-winged kite (Africa, India, SE Asia, SW Europe) are often considered a superspecies (e.g. Parkes 1958, Negro et al. 2006). While globally the black-winged kite is classified as Least Concern, a relatively small European population is the reason why the species is evaluated as Rare in Europe (Tucker & Heath 1994).

Unlike most raptors, the black-winged kite is able to raise several broods per year and has been found to breed, even in its European foothold in the Iberian Peninsula, virtually at any time of year (Mendelsohn 1984, Ferrero et al. 2003, Negro et al. 2006). This adaptation, together with a nomadic lifestyle and a strong ability to disperse over long distances, is thought to result from spatial and temporal irregularity in prey densities occurring in arid zones (Mendelsohn & Jaksic 1989).

A relatively recent expansion of the black-winged kite from NW Africa to the Iberian Peninsula is thought to reflect agricultural intensification contributing to an increase in area of agricultural, savanna-like habitat in Spain and Portugal (Carbajo & Ferrero 1985, Ferrero & Onrubia 2003, Balbontín et al. 2008). However, a parallel expansion of the species has also taken place in the Middle East since the 1990s (Jennings 2010), with causes not clearly attributable to changes in farming within the extension area. In Europe, the first breeding of the species was recorded in 1944 in Portugal (properly documented in 1963; England 1963), in 1975 in Spain (Anonymous 1977) and in 1983 in France (Papacotsia & Petit 1984; first fledglings confirmed in 1990, Guyot 1990). Currently, about 1,000–2,000 pairs are estimated to breed in Portugal, Spain and France (BirdLife International 2004). While the breeding population seems stable in Portugal and Spain (BirdLife International 2004), the more recent population in France gradually increased from 4 pairs in 2000 to 28 pairs in 2008 (de Seynes 2010). The first breeding records of the species in the Middle East were reported

from Iran in 1998 (Scott & Adhami 2006), from Iraq in 2001 (Salim 2002; confirmed breeding in 2008, Ararat et al. 2011), and from Israel in 2011 (Israeli 2012). While breeding is not yet confirmed for Turkey, Karakaş (2012) suggests breeding is possible in SE Anatolia where cereal fields have substantially increased in the area due to recent reservoir construction projects. Most black-winged kites recorded in the SW Middle East, as well as in Italy and Cyprus, have presumably North African origin (Cramp & Simmons 1980, del Hoyo et al. 1994, Forsman 1999, Karakaş 2012). However, the Middle East region seems to be experiencing a parallel expansion of the eastern subspecies of black-winged kite (*E. c. vociferus*) from the east, with the number of observations of the species increasing in Iran and Iraq since the 1980s (Jennings 2010). In fact, the first two breeding records of the black-winged kite in Israel in 2011 and 2012 were presumably achieved by *E. c. vociferus* (Krumenacker 2011, Pearlman 2012). Moreover, as of 2012 both western and eastern subspecies, *E. c. caeruleus* and *E. c. vociferus* respectively, have been observed in Saudi Arabia (Babbington 2012).

During the last decade, the number of observations of the black-winged kite in Europe has been steadily increasing away from its breeding grounds in Portugal, Spain and France. In the new millennium, the species has been observed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Italy and Greece. Here I report the first observation of the black-winged kite in Slovakia on August 15, 2012.

Observation site and details

The black-winged kite was observed in the Žitavský luh Nature Reserve in SW Slovakia (48° 10' 44'' N, 18° 17' 37'' E, altitude ~ 130 metres a. s. l.). This lowland area belongs in the Pannonian phytogeographical region (Pannonicum), comprising alluvial meadows, marshlands and crop fields. Woody vegetation is sparse and limited to riparian vegetation (*Salix* spp., *Populus* spp., *Alnus glutinosa*, *Crataegus monogyna*) surrounding the marshes and water channels, as well as trees (mainly *Robinia pseudoacacia*) and shrubs (mainly *Prunus spinosa*) delimiting the arable farmland (Fig. 1). A single bird was observed during a crepuscular period between 18.40 h and 19.30 h local time (sunset at ~20.00 h local time, August 15, 2012) in two time intervals totaling 40 min. During the observation period the temperature reached 26–27 °C, the sky was clear and the wind was weak (<5 km/h). I did not observe the species at this site from August 16 to 18.

Individual characters

The underwing pattern of the observed individual with pale secondaries indicates the western subspecies of the black-winged kite *E. c. caeruleus* (Fig. 2). In turn, contour plumage features (including scapulars and greater upper coverts without pale fringes), bright yellow feet (Figs 2, 3) and red eyes point to an adult individual. The bird was in active moult with dropped inner primaries on both wings (p1 on both wings) and inner (t1) tail feathers. Following Cramp & Simmons (1980), Forsman (1999), and Herremans (2000), such plumage features combined suggest a bird in at least its second moult cycle.

Behavioural observations

All behavioural observations took place in an alluvial meadow and a nearby crop field where the bird was seen to flight-hunt and consume prey. I recorded three successful hunting attempts during 40 min., with the bird readily capturing three micro-mammals (presumably the common vole *Microtus arvalis*, which showed a peak year in Slovakia in 2012) and subsequently consuming its prey in the top branches of young grey poplars *Populus×canadensis*. Although the bird searched for prey in both a disc-harrowed field and an unmowed meadow, all prey items were captured in the meadow. During hunting or prey processing, the bird did not interact with other raptors present at the site (common kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and western marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*), except for flushing a juvenile western marsh harrier from a *Carex* (sedge) stand during one of the hunting bouts.

Circumstances

A day before the observation of the black-winged kite, i. e. August 14, a strong NW wind (~50 km/h above ground) prevailed at the observation site during daylight hours. Over the period of August 12 to 18 when the site was visited daily, a group of four black storks *Ciconia nigra* was first recorded at the site on August 15, i. e. on the same day as the black-winged kite. A ring code identified on one of the four black storks by R. Kvetko revealed that the bird had been ringed as a juvenile in 2012 near Plzeň in SW Czech Republic, ~400 km NW from the observation site (J. Vlček, in litt.). Moreover, seven days after the black-winged kite had been observed in Slovakia, an adult black-winged kite was observed between August 22 and 27 near Csákvár in Hungary (Szalai 2012), ~90 km S from the Slovakian observation site. The bird observed in Hungary showed the same wing-moult pattern as the one

Slovak Raptor Journal 2012, 6: 27–30. DOI: 10.2478/v10262-012-0062-y.


R. Václav


R. Václav

Fig. 1. The observation site of the black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* at the Žitavský luh Nature Reserve in SW Slovakia. The marsh and meadow (left photo) and the arable fields (right photo) where the bird was observed are shown. The photos were taken on September 15, 2012.
Obr. 1. Lokalita pozorovania luniaka sivého *Elanus caeruleus* na území PR Žitavský luh v JZ časti Slovenska. Fotky zobrazujú močiarny a lúčny biotop (foto vľavo) ako aj polia (foto vpravo), kde bol luniak pozorovaný. Fotografie územia sú z 15. septembra 2012.


R. Václav


R. Václav

Fig. 2. The black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* observed at the Žitavský luh Nature Reserve in SW Slovakia. The pale underwing to secondaries indicates the nominate subspecies *E. c. caeruleus*.
Obr. 2. Luniak sivý *Elanus caeruleus* pozorovaný na lokalite Žitavský luh v JZ časti Slovenska. Bledý okraj spodnej časti lakťových letiek poukazuje na nominátny poddruh *E. c. caeruleus*.

Fig. 3. The black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* observed at the Žitavský luh Nature Reserve in SW Slovakia. Upperwing coverts and the tips of flight feathers without pale fringes as well as bright yellow legs point to an adult individual.
Obr. 3. Luniak sivý *Elanus caeruleus* pozorovaný na lokalite Žitavský luh v JZ časti Slovenska. Krycie krovky vrchnej časti krídel, špičky letiek bez svetlého lemu ako aj sýto žlté sfarbenie nôh poukazujú na dospelého jedinca.

from Slovakia (c.f. Szalai & Szász 2012). As the observed birds were not individually marked, I can only speculate that the black-winged kite observed in Slovakia and Hungary in August 2012 was the same individual and of W European origin. As of October 2012, I am not aware of further records of the species from geographically neighbouring areas.

The observation of the black-winged kite described in this article has been accepted by the Rarities Committee of the Slovak Ornithological Society/BirdLife Slovakia under decision No. 35/2012 as the first record of the species in Slovakia.

References

Anonymous 1977: Notas ornitologicas brevas. Ardeola 22: 113–129.

Ararat K, Fadhil O, Porter RF & Salim M 2011: Breeding birds in Iraq: important new discoveries. Sandgrouse 33: 12–33.

Babbington J 2012: Black-winged kite – Dhahran Hills.

Electronic publication. Retrieved October 9, 2012, from http://www.birdsofsaudiarabia.com.

Balbontín J, Negro JJ, Sarasola JH, Ferrero JJ & Rivera D 2008: Land-use changes may explain the recent range expansion of the black-shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus* in southern Europe. Ibis 150: 707–718. DOI: 10.1111/j.1474-919X.2008.00845.x.

BirdLife International 2004: Birds in the European Union: a status assessment. BirdLife International, Wageningen, The Netherlands, 50.

Brown L & Amadon D 1968: Eagles, hawks and falcons of the world. Country Life Books, London, 945.

Carbajo F & Ferrero JJ 1985: Ecology and status of the black-shouldered kite in Extremadura, Western Spain, 137–141. In: Newton I & Chancellor RD (eds), Conservation studies on raptors. ICPB, Cambridge, 482.

Cramp S & Simmons KEL 1980: Handbook of the birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Vol. 2. Oxford University Press, London, 695.

England MD 1963: Observations on the black-winged kite in Portugal with preliminary notes on its status. British Birds 54: 444–452.

Ferrero JJ, Grande JJ & Negro JJ 2003: Copulation behaviour of the black-winged kite (*Elanus caeruleus*). Journal of Raptor Research 37(1): 1–7.

Ferrero JJ & Onrubia A 2003: Elanio Común, 158–159. In: Martí R & del Moral JC (eds), Atlas de Aves nidificantes de España. Dirección General de Medio Ambiente – Sociedad Española de Ornitología, Madrid, 730. [In Spanish]

Forsman D 1999: The raptors of Europe and the Middle East: a handbook of field identification. T&AD Poyser, London, 589.

Guyot A 1990: Première nidification réussie en France de l'Elanion blanc, *Elanus caeruleus*. Nos Oiseaux 40: 465–477.

Herremans D 2000: Cases of serial descendant primary moult (Staffelmauser) in the black-shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus*. Ringing & Migration 20: 15–18.

del Hoyo J, Elliott A & Sargatal J 1994: Handbook of the birds of the World. Vol. 2. New World vultures to guineafowl. Lynx Editions, Barcelona, 638.

Israeli N 2012: The first breeding record of the black-shouldered kite in Israel. A Bird's Eye View of the Holy Land – Newsletter from Israel 11: 8.

Jennings MC 2010: Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia. Fauna of Arabia, Vol. 25. Karger Libri, Basel, Switzerland, 738.

Karakaş R 2012: Does black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* (Desfontaines, 1789) have an expansion in its range in Turkey? Acta Zoologica Bulgarica 64(2): 209–214.

Krumenacker T 2011: Gleitaar – Neuer Brutvogel in Israel. Electronic publication. Retrieved October 9, 2012, from http://www.krumanacker.com.

Mendelsohn JM 1984: The timing of breeding in black-shouldered kites in Southern Africa, 799–808. In: Ledger J (ed), Proceedings of the fifth Pan-African Ornithological Congress, Southern African Ornithological Society, Johannesburg, South Africa, 885.

Mendelsohn JM & Jaksic FM 1989: Hunting behaviour of black-shouldered kites in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australia. Ostrich 60: 1–12.

Negro JJ, Pertoldi C, Randi E, Ferrero JJ, López-Caballero, Rivera D & Korpimäki E 2006: Convergent evolution of *Elanus* kites and the owls. Journal of Raptor Research 40(3): 222–225.

Papacotsia A & Petit P 1984: Présence d'un couple d'Elanions blancs *Elanus caeruleus* en Aquitaine. Le Courbageot 10: 19–24.

Parkes K 1958: Specific relationships in the genus *Elanus*. Condor 60: 139–140.

Pearlman Y 2012: Black-winged kite. Electronic publication. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from http://nubijar.blogspot.com.

Salim MA 2002: The first records, including breeding of black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus* in Iraq. Sandgrouse 2: 136–138.

Scott DA & Adhami A 2006: An updated checklist of birds of Iran. Podoces 1: 1–16.

de Seynes A 2009. Les oiseaux nicheurs rares et menacés en France en 2008. Ornithos 16–3: 153–184.

Szalai G 2012: Black-winged kite. Electronic publication. Retrieved on October 9, 2012, from http://-www.rarebirds.hu.

Szalai G & Szász P 2012: Új madárfaj Magyarországon [A new bird species for Hungary]. Electronic publication. Retrieved October 9, 2012, from http://-www.mme.hu. [In Hungarian]

Tucker GM & Heath MF 1994: Birds in Europe: their conservation status. Birdlife International, Cambridge, 600.