Once a rare sight in southern Illinois, the bird known as a Mississippi kite is making a comeback.

Kites on the Rise

(Photo By Scott Ballard)

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Spring bird count, Villa Ridge, Illinois: same street and same church parking lot as previous years.

After a few minutes of waiting, two ghostly silhouettes appear soaring high above the town. They are Mississippi kites, a bird John James Audubon referred to as the "hawk of the south," a medium-sized, insect-eating raptor.

Yes, the Mississippi kite is a raptor, a genuine bird of prey, but one that prefers a steady diet of dragonflies, grasshoppers, cicadas and perhaps an occasional frog or lizard. Other more colorful common names include blue darter, locust hawk, spotted tail hobby and lead kite, to name but a few. The scientific name, *Ictinia mississippiensis*, comes from the Greek word for kite and the location where the first type specimen was collected.

Thirty years ago, this bird was a rare sight in southern Illinois, but a look at spring bird count numbers since the mid-1980s reveals an almost four-fold increase in numbers observed. First discovered during an expedition into the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase more than 200 years ago, many expedition naturalists noted an abundance of

Field marks for identifying adult Mississippi kites include red eyes, a gray head with a dark eye mask and a black tail.

Mississippi kites are graceful raptors, spending daylight hours soaring over open fields in search of insects.

Mississippi kites along the borders of prairies and wooded stream banks. These riparian habitats are still the best place to view kites today, which is why places like Villa Ridge (just 3 and 5 miles respectively from the Cache and Ohio rivers) are good locations to sight a kite during the Pulaski County spring bird count. (Cario, Thebes and numerous other river towns in the southern part of the state are great locations for kite watching, as are Union County State Fish and Wildlife Area and Horseshoe Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area.)

The downfall in years past and relatively recent success of this quiet, non-obtrusive bird has most likely been its preference for the productive bottomland forests along our southern rivers. The period of rapid agricultural development, along with associated land clearing, drainage and heavy pesticide use, was a body blow to the reproductive success of this bird which loves to nest in riparian woodlands, often selecting very tall or super-canopy trees in which to perch and nest.

Recent years have seen a recovery of lands which were in most cases marginal for crop production, the planting of thousands of acres of trees and a banning of dangerous pesticides. Another reason for the bird's current success could be a range expansion as areas formerly considered too far north and on the "edge" of the historical range become more attractive.

Kites are in Illinois for only four months, approximately, so their activities here center around reproduction, rearing young and then preparation for a return to wintering habitat. First arrivals in southern Illinois begin in late April and may stretch through early May. Breeding adults (which some researchers believe mate for life) are already paired upon arrival. Nesting begins almost immediately and young are leaving the nest by late July. Migration to South America begins in late August and rarely lingers much past the first week of September.

Patience is the key to glimpsing one of these magnificent birds in the wild, and an early start also is helpful. A wait in suitable habitat is soon rewarded as the appearance of a bird quietly and gracefully floating high above usually follows.

Since the birds feed mainly on insects, watching feeding kites can be exciting as they pop up into view and dodge back and forth in pursuit of their prey. The birds often choose a dead snag poking up among the surrounding trees to rest and preen in after extended feeding patrols along levees and fields. Field marks to look for include an overall gray body plumage, pale gray head with dark mask around the eye area, falcon-like silhouette with pointed wings and a long, square, black tail. A close look at an adult bird reveals two striking aspects of the birds appearance: red eyes and a conspicuous, white wing patch, visible from a distance.

Take a summer-time trip along some of southern Illinois' rivers to enjoy the resurgence of a bird early explorers found enchanting, and also enjoy the beauty of the wild lands, farms and even urban landscapes which the Mississippi kite now calls home...for at least part of its interesting life.

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Dead snags serve as perches for resting Mississippi kites. Pictured is an immature kite.