

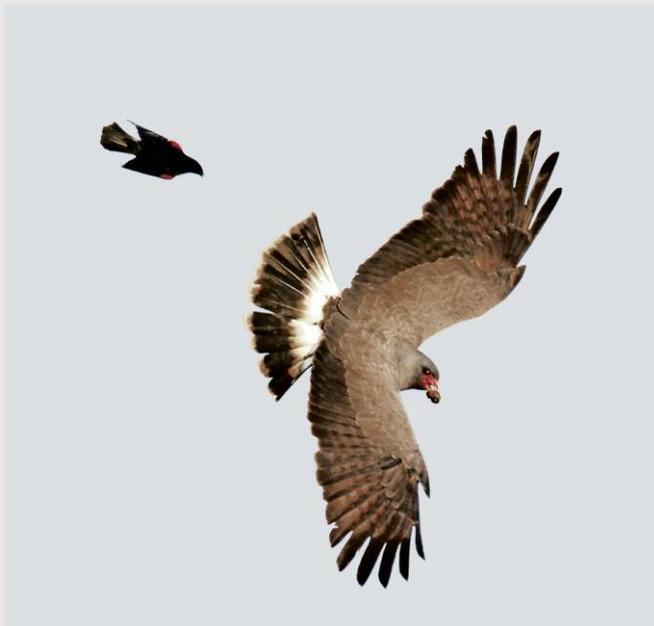
About the Cover Photography

by Jim Neiger



Snail Kites are abundant in parts of Central and South America, but in the United States, the species numbers fewer than two thousand and is ranked among the rarest birds of prey in the nation. The only place in the U.S. where the beautiful and endangered Snail Kites are found is in the southern half of the state of Florida.

The Snail Kite is a large bird with a long hook-shaped bill and a wingspan of nearly four feet. Male kites are slate gray in color, and females are dark brown. The base of the tail on both is snow-white, similar to a Northern Harrier. Its long bill allows the Snail Kite to feed on its primary prey, the apple snail. The apple snail is thought by many to be the only prey of the Snail Kite, but I have also observed the species eating young turtles, and in one case, a crawfish. One of the photographs on the cover (**cover flap, top photo**) shows a kite feasting on a small turtle. During the past few years, Florida has become home to an ever-increasing number of exotic South American channeled apple snails, which are much larger and more invasive than the Florida apple snail. Snail Kites have adapted to feeding on the larger, exotic snail, which now makes up the majority of their diet.



Snail Kites live and thrive in the freshwater marshes and shallow lakes that make up large portions of central and south Florida. This vast watery wilderness covers millions of acres and easily encompasses the range of the fewer than 2,000 Snail Kites that live here. I am fortunate to live on Lake Tohopekaliga in central Florida, where many of these birds can be observed. I spend many of my days locating, studying, and photographing the Snail Kites. In the case of the Snail Kites, most of the really interesting activities can be observed only from a boat capable of maneuvering in very shallow water. I use a new, spacious pontoon boat, which has been customized

for photography. An electric trolling motor allows for silent and precise movement, and a remote control permits me to pilot the boat and take pictures at the same time. I photograph with a Canon EOS 1D Mark II N camera and a Canon 500mm F4 IS L lens. A Canon 1.4× or 2× teleconverter is often added. I use a handheld technique that I have developed specifically for capturing birds in flight using long telephoto lenses. This technique works well with the kites and with the boat, allowing me to capture images that would not be possible otherwise.

During my time observing and photographing the Snail Kites, I have watched with fascination as they glide along low to the water with their heads down searching for the snails clinging to vegetation just below the surface. They soar back and forth making banking turns with occasional stalls or loops when they spot something promising. They are beautiful, graceful birds. Unfortunately, their low flight patterns, with their heads down searching for snails, makes them easy targets for attackers. As they hunt for snails, the kites are often harassed by Red-winged Blackbirds, grackles, and crows. The smaller birds tend to dive down on the kites from above and behind (**main cover photo**).

Once the Snail Kites have spotted their prey, they must plunge into the water to get it. This is when things get really



interesting. The kites slam on the brakes and loop around while diving down at the same time. When they are just a few feet above the water, they flap and hover directly above the prey. When they are in position, they just lift their wings straight up and drop into the water. Sometimes, they go in neck-deep to retrieve their prey. Another feeding technique they use is to thrust downward with their feet first as they enter the water, punching through the thick matted vegetation to get at the snails below. Next, the kites must use their powerful wings to lift themselves from the water, dragging their prey and anything clinging to the prey with them (**flap, lower left**).

After a Snail Kite has successfully captured a snail, it must take it to a perch where it can consume the prey (**flap, right center**). This poses some challenges for the kite. First, it must choose between trying to land with one foot while holding the snail with the other foot, or it must transfer the snail from its feet to its bill so it can use both feet for landing. Snail Kites use both methods, but transferring the snail is the most common method. Snail Kites must also evade their attackers without dropping their prey while they fly to a perch to eat (**see photo, Table of Contents, p. 5**).

Watching kites eat is interesting. When a bird arrives at the perch with a snail in its bill, it always grasps the snail by the edge of the opening of the shell. Once firmly perched, the kite holds the snail with its talons and uses its long curved bill to remove the innards. The shape of the bill makes it the right tool for the job. Sometimes, kites pull out small chunks at a time and toss them in the air, catch them, and gobble them down. Sometimes, they take a chunk of snail, fly off, and go eat it somewhere else. Other times, they remove the snail in one big piece and eat it whole.

After a long day of hunting, capturing snails, evading attackers, and eating, the Snail Kite likes to find a nice comfortable perch where it can rest, preen, and voice its displeasure at its ever-present attackers (**flap, lower right**). These behaviors also afford spectacular images of this magnificent species, which like many of us, appears to be taking great pleasure in the wonders of tropical Florida.

Central Florida offers some of the best birding opportunities in the world. My desire to share this birding paradise with others led me to create Flight School Photography <flightschoolphotography.com>, which features scheduled group and private, on-demand photography tours and workshops by land or by boat. I also created the *Central Florida Canoe Creek Road Area Site Guide*, a publication that contains detailed descriptions of the handheld techniques I use to photograph birds in flight and that serves as a guide to some of my favorite birding spots.

About Jim Neiger

Jim Neiger is an award-winning, freelance avian photographer specializing in birds in flight. He lives in the birding paradise of central Florida and has acquired extensive knowledge of the birds in that area. Jim has also developed his own method of handheld photography using long telephoto lenses, which he applies to making images of birds in flight. His handheld method has gained recent popularity, and has led to the creation of his company, Flight School Photography. Jim's Flight School offers individual and group workshops in which handheld photography instruction for birds in flight is provided. He also offers private photography tours and workshops, by land or by boat, that are tailored specifically to the requirements and desires of the participants. To experience some of the best bird photography opportunities in Florida, contact Jim via e-mail at <jimn@cfl.rr.com> or through his website at <flightschoolphotography.com>.