

THE SWALLOW-TAILED KITE IN BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

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ABSTRACT: From 19 April through August 2025, a Swallow-tailed Kite, possibly a single individual, was seen at various locations straddling the Mexico/USA border, from El Rosario, Baja California, northwest 585 km to western Ventura County, California. Photographed at Ensenada, Baja California, as well as at various locations north of the border, it represents a first photo-documented record of the Swallow-tailed Kite for the peninsula. After spring wanderings both north and south, it summered at Machado Lake in Harbor City, Los Angeles.

On 22 April 2025, from 15:33 to 15:43, Moreno-Higareda, Raymundo-González, and Maldonado observed, and Moreno-Higareda photographed, a Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) flying over an urban area in Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico (31° 52' 57.3' N, 116° 37' 28.0' W). The bird was heard, but not seen, in the same area the following day. Vocalizations resembling “*klee-klee-klee*” or “*wheet-wheet-wheet*” were also heard; several pictures of the bird were taken with a Motorola cell phone 40 neo (India). During the observation, the kite was foraging in flight in association with groups of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) and Cliff Swallows (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*). It was readily identified by its striking black-and-white plumage, long, narrow wings, and deeply forked tail, with a graceful flight (Meyer 2020; Figure 1).

This represents the first photo-documented record of the Swallow-tailed Kite for the Baja California peninsula and is one of very few for the entire Pacific coast of North America, including western Mexico. The species is generally considered a vagrant west of its typical migratory corridor along the Gulf of Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula, rarely occurring on the Pacific slope north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Howell and Webb 1995, <https://eBird.org>). Previous records for the Baja California peninsula include sight records (with descriptions) on 26 April 2013, in La Ribera, Baja California Sur (Bob Packard, <https://eBird.org/checklist/S14644654>), and 19 April 2025, in El Rosario, Baja California (Tom Castro, <https://eBird.org/checklist/S227223351>).

To the north, the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) has accepted the reports of three individuals through 2024: one in Sonoma County on 4 October 2007 (Singer and Terrill 2009), one at two locations in coastal San Diego County on 22 April 2016 (McCaskie et al. 2018), and two individuals in spring 2024 that appeared in Encino, Los Angeles County (22 April 2024), with one then near Moorpark,

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FIGURE 1. Adult Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) in Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico, photographed on 22 April 2025. Even in a photo taken with a cell phone, the species' distinctive plumage and shape are evident: bright white head, neck, and underparts; striking black trailing edge of the wings and entire upper wing coverts and primaries; and a long, deeply forked black tail.

Photo by Hiram Rafael Moreno-Higareda

Ventura County (27 April 2024), on Point Reyes, Marin County, and at the Farallon Islands, San Francisco County, on 3 May 2024 (CBRC 2025).

Following our observation in Ensenada on 22 April 2025, one Swallow-tailed Kite, presumably the same bird, was seen 373 km to the northwest near Casitas Springs in Ventura County on 25 April 2025, then the following day (26 April 2025) flying south at various locations, still in Ventura County. On 10 May 2025, what was presumed to be the same individual was seen flying over Interstate 15 in Wildomar, Riverside County (Dubi Shapiro, <https://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist/S235597506>), and over the Tijuana River valley of San Diego County flying high in a southerly direction (Carl Poldrack, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S236046493>). It was next reported over Lake Huntington in Huntington Beach Central Park, Orange County, on 25 May 2025 (Iris Magboo, <https://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist/S242645836>). Then, on 3 June 2025, a Swallow-tailed Kite was photographed at Machado Lake (site of the former Bixby Slough) between Harbor City and Wilmington, Los Angeles County (see this issue's outside back cover). It remained there until 17 August 2025 (K. L. Garrett pers. comm.). In addition, three sightings were reported to <https://eBird.org> from Jalisco, Mexico, in late March and early April 2025. While speculative, it is plausible that *all* these sightings in 2024 and 2025, including the one at El Rosario 220 km to the south-southeast and three days previous to ours at Ensenada, represent the same individual. The California Bird Records Committee is currently evaluating the 2025 sightings in California.

The subspecies *E. f. forficatus* normally migrates from the southeastern U.S. to South America mainly via the Gulf of Mexico (Meyer and Collopy 1990, Meyer 1993), with little evidence of consistent passage through the Caribbean or along Mexico's Pacific coast (Goodrich et al. 1993). The Ensenada bird's association with migratory swallows and its mid-spring timing, along with the Jalisco records earlier in 2025, may indicate a northbound overshoot or weather-related drift. Alternatively, it may reflect documented flexibility in this species' movements, known to span over 6500 km as shown by a band recovery (Mager 1967). The record underscores the need for continued monitoring of coastal and inland areas in northwestern Mexico

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for rare migrants. It also shows the value of online community-science platforms such as <https://eBird.org> in documenting rare species and even individuals.

We thank Philip Unitt for his assistance in encouraging birdwatchers in southern California to search for this species, thereby enabling us to include additional records in this note.

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