BLACK KITES (MILVUS MIGRANS) WINTER IN SOUTHEASTERN ANATOLIA, TURKEY

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KEY WORDS: Black Kite; Milvus migrans; garbage dump; Turkey; wintering.

Black Kites (Milvus migrans) are migratory, with the exceptions of some essentially resident populations (e.g., M. m. govinia in southern Asia and M. m. parasitus in sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar; Cramp 1998, Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2005). In the western Palearctic, the species is considered widespread with reported population increases for some countries and declines for others (Sergio et al. 2003, BirdLife International 2004, Mebs and Schmidt 2006, Sanderson et al. 2006). The nominate form of the species breeds in Europe and usually winters in western sub-Saharan Africa and in small regions of southern Europe, i.e., in Spain (Sunyer and Viñuela 1996) and in Sicily (Sara 2003). During the autumn migration, large numbers of European kites (up to 60,000 individuals in one season) travel to Africa, mainly via Gibraltar (Mebs and Schmidt 2006, Meyburg and Meyburg 2009). Another portion of the Palearctic population uses the flyway from the eastern Black Sea to the southern Arabian peninsula, subsequently crossing via Bab-al-Mandub in Yemen to eastern Africa (Shirihi 2000). Additionally, a few ring recoveries originating from northern and eastern Europe indicate an alternative route via Anatolia, Turkey; for example, one bird ringed in Finland was found in Jordan, and two others ringed in western Russia were recovered in Kenya and South Africa, respectively (Scheider et al. 2004).

In 2001, the Black Kite population of Turkey was estimated at 1000–1500 breeding pairs (BirdLife International 2004). This number was later updated to 1500–2500 (2003 data; Mebs and Schmidt 2006). Although only small numbers of Black Kites have been recorded in winter (December to February) in the coastal region of Mediterranean Europe, in southeastern Anatolia larger groups up to 200 individuals were detected in 2004–05 (KusBank 2011). In this report, we describe some previously unknown wintering areas of Black Kites in southeastern Anatolia.

METHODS

Southeastern Anatolia, one of the seven major geographical regions of Turkey, is characterized by a dry climate and a landscape of lowlands and steppe areas. Several parts of the region have been frequently visited year-round for various ornithological studies, particularly in the last two decades. Since 2002, our observations have become more intensive and have covered larger areas. During recent trips to the region, we focused our survey efforts on wintering birds, Black Kites in particular. Potentially suitable areas, such as city dumps and slaughterhouses, were regularly checked during each local visit. Observations were made with binoculars (8 × 40), spotting scopes (20–60 × 80), and locations were recorded with a GPS. All kites observed between 1 December and 1 March were considered wintering.

RESULTS

We observed wintering Black Kites at several locations in southeastern Anatolia (Table 1, Fig. 1). The region that apparently held the largest concentrations of wintering kites was located along Alleben Creek, which runs between Gaziantep and Oğuzeli (Fig. 1). This region was characterized by dry valleys with patches of steppe and agricultural fields interspersed with limestone cliffs. Pistachio (Pistacia vera) orchards and olive (Olea europaea) groves as well as poplar (Populus nigra) and mulberry (Morus alba) trees dominated the areas near settlements and along the creek.

Most kites were observed at rubbish dumps, where household garbage was deposited indiscriminately, and around slaughterhouses and leather workshops, where pieces of viscera, bones, horn, and skin of the slaughtered livestock (sheep, cattle, goat, etc.) were regularly available. The other species observed scavenging at such sites included European Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris), Eurasian Jackdaws (Corvus monedula), Black-billed Magpies (Pica pica) and domestic dogs (Canis familiaris).

DISCUSSION

Garbage dumps have been considered by previous authors as an important food resource for nonbreeding and especially migrating kites, and only of secondary importance during the breeding season (Blanco 1994, 1997). Therefore, it was unsurprising that most wintering kites were observed close to rubbish dumps or functionally similar places during this study. In particular, most birds were concentrated near the rubbish dump of Gaziantep, the biggest city of southeastern Anatolia (850,000 inhabitants in 2000; Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr). This garbage dump was located about 6 km south of the city (Fig. 1) and received nearly 411,000 tons of waste in 2008, of which 354,000 tons originated from the city center alone (Turkish Statistical Institute, www.tuik.gov.tr). Other kite