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Swallow-tailed Kites share a frog on their "dinner date."

THEY'RE NOT KITES!

"Hey Hart, I saw four Swallow-tailed Kites yesterday." As the call came on a late January morning, I was skeptical, but I followed up, "No kidding, where did you see them?" "Over the Fort Pierce Inlet, heading for the Indian River." Swallow-tailed Kites arrive back in south Florida in early March, not January or February, so I continued, "What did they look like?" "They were big and black, but they definitely had the Swallow-tail."



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Mystery solved: "They're not Kites, they are Magnificent Frigatebirds." Frigatebirds, are actually seabirds, that eat fish they snatch from the sea surface or steal from other sea birds. They love to soar over the beaches and ride the upward air thermals when the wind blows off the ocean and against the high rise buildings dotting North Hutchinson Island. They then head back south across the Fort Pierce Inlet and along the Indian River to their roosting place on a small unnamed mangrove island in the Indian River near Stuart. They can be seen almost any time of any day, but more likely when the winds blow in off the ocean from the east.

Conversely, Swallow-tailed Kites are most likely to be seen more inland, particularly along the St Lucie River where they often nest, although they will forage far and wide and frequently can be observed just over the tree tops where they search for food.

Magnificent Frigatebirds do indeed have split swallow-like tails, but they are much larger than Swallow-tailed Kites, which have small beaks relative to the Frigatebirds large hooked beak. (photo 1) When Frigatebirds come in for a landing, their swallow-type tails are quite evident. (photo 2) One can well understand how a birder could confuse an immature Magnificent Frigatebird with a Swallow-tailed Kite, for the young bird sports an all-white head and breast, more like the Kites. (photo 3) But the male Frigatebird has one of the more unique mating strategies in America when preparing for courting and breeding, for it can inflate a patch of bare skin on its throat, known as a gular sac, into a huge attraction for an impressionable female. (photo 4) The skin patch is barely noticeable outside of the breeding season.

Swallow-tailed Kites are definitely land birds, have a smaller slightly hooked bill, and are dark above, and light below. This configuration is fairly common among birds, as a predator looking down on the bird will see the dark side (photo 5) blending into the ground, while another predator looking up would see the white underside (photo 6) blending into the sky above. This slight disguise is obviously not foolproof but every little bit helps. We watched this male Kite bringing a small frog to its waiting female (bottom right) and then watched the presumably nuptial exchange of the frog. (top)

While many similar appearing species can be quite confusing to birders (think Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, or Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs), or even the most experienced and sophisticated birders (think Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers, or Lesser and Greater Scaup), Magnificent Frigatebirds and Swallow-tailed Kites should not fall into either of these confusing categories.

Yes, they both have split tails. But that is where the similarity ends. Different size; different coloration; different types of beaks, different habitats, different diets and different periods of presence in our area, should make them easily distinguishable, one from the other.

Nevertheless, if you see birds that are confusing to you, don't hesitate to call me and ask about what species it might be. Who knows, you may provide the idea or inspiration for my next column. In fact, I may one day devise some kind of prize for the reader or birder friend who calls with the most questions and inspires the most ideas for columns. No, I assure you in advance, the prize will not reach six figures. Probably not even with the decimal point. But I will always take your call.

For more information on dark above, light below, predator prevention coloration, see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countershading.





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