The young when fledged have the bill and claws black, the cere and feet dull yellow; the upper parts brownish grey, the scapulars and quills tipped with white, the former also margined with yellowish-brown; the primary and secondary coverts are also tipped with white; the smaller wing-coverts are brownish-black; the outer webs of all the tail-feathers are more or less brownish-grey toward the end. The lower parts are white, the feathers on the breast tinged with brownish-yellow at the end, and with the shaft yellowish-brown. The lower wing-coverts are all white.

GENUS VII.—ICTINIA, *Vieillot.*

Bill very short, wide at the base, much compressed toward the end; upper mandible with the dorsal line decurved in its whole length, the sides slightly convex, the tip narrow and acute, the edges with an obtuse lobe; lower mandible with the angle very wide, the dorsal line ascending and convex, the tip rather broad and obliquely truncate. Nostrils round, lateral, with a central papilla. Head rather large, roundish, broad, flattened; neck short, body compact. Legs rather short; tarsus stout, covered anteriorly with scutella; toes scutellate above, scabrous beneath, with pointed papillæ; claws rather long, curved, acuminate, flattened beneath. Plumage rather compact. Wings very long, the third quill longest. Tail long, emarginate.

This genus is easily distinguished from *Elanus*; the tarsi and toes being scutellate in this, and scaly in that; and the festoon on the upper mandible is much more prominent in the *Ictinia*, while the nostrils, instead of being elliptical, are round, as in the *Falcons*.

THE MISSISSIPPI KITE.

+*ICTINIA PLUMBEUS*, *Gmel.*

PLATE XVII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

When, after many a severe conflict, the southern breezes, in alliance with the sun, have, as if through a generous effort, driven back for a season to their desolate abode the chill blasts of the north; when warmth and plenty are insured for a while to our happy lands; when clouds of anxious Swallows, returning from the far south, are guiding millions of Warblers to their sum-

mer residence; when numberless insects, cramped in their hanging shells, are impatiently waiting for the full expansion of their wings; when the vernal flowers, so welcome to all, swell out their bursting leaflets, and the rich-leaved Magnolia opens its pure blossoms to the Humming Bird;—then look up, and you will see the Mississippi Kite, as he comes sailing over the scene. He glances towards the earth with his fiery eye; sweeps along, now with the gentle breeze, now against it; seizes here and there the high-flying giddy bug, and allays his hunger without fatigue to wing or talon. Suddenly he spies some creeping thing, that changes, like the chameleon, from vivid green to dull brown, to escape his notice. It is the red-throated panting lizard that has made its way to the highest branch of a tree in quest of food. Casting upwards a sidelong look of fear, it remains motionless, so well does it know the prowess of the bird of prey: but its caution is vain; it has been perceived, its fate is sealed, and the next moment it is swept away.

The Mississippi Kite thus extends its migrations as high as the city of Memphis, on the noble stream whose name it bears, and along our eastern shores to the Carolinas, where it now and then breeds, feeding the while on lizards, small snakes, and beetles. At times, congregating to the number of twenty or more, these birds are seen sweeping around some tree, catching the large locusts which abound in those countries at an early part of the season, and reminding one of the Chimney Swallows, which are so often seen performing similar evolutions, when endeavouring to snap off the little dried twigs of which their nests are composed.

Early in May, the thick-leaved Bay-Tree (*Magnolia grandiflora*), affords in its high tops a place of safety, in which the Hawk of the South may raise its young. These are out by the end of July, and are fed by the parent birds until well practised in the art of procuring subsistence. About the middle of August, they all wing their way southward.

The affection which the old birds display towards their young, and the methods which they occasionally employ to insure the safety of the latter, are so remarkable, that, before I proceed to describe their general habits, I shall relate a case in which I was concerned.

Early one morning, whilst I was admiring the beauties of nature, as the vegetable world lay embalmed in dew, I heard the cry of a bird that I mistook for that of a Pewee Flycatcher. It was prolonged, I thought, as if uttered in distress. After looking for the bird a long time in vain, an object which I had at first supposed to be something that had accidentally lodged in a branch, attracted my attention, as I thought I perceived it moving. It did move distinctly, and the cry that had ceased from the time when I reached the spot where I stood, was repeated, evidently coming from the object in view. I now took it for a young Chuck-Will's-Widow, as it sat lengthwise

Mississippi Kite.

on the branch. I shot at it, but perhaps did not hit it, as it only opened and closed its wings, as if surprised. At the report of the gun, the old bird came, holding food in her claws. She perceived me, but alighted, and fed her young with great kindness. I shot at both, and again missed, or at least did not succeed, which might have happened from my having only small shot in my gun. The mother flew in silence, sailed over head just long enough to afford me time to reload, returned, and to my great surprise gently lifted her young, and sailing with it to another tree, about thirty yards distant, deposited it there. My feelings at that moment I cannot express. I wished I had not discovered the poor bird; for who could have witnessed, without emotion, so striking an example of that affection which none but a mother can feel; so daring an act, performed in the midst of smoke, in the presence of a dreaded and dangerous enemy. I followed, however, and brought both to the ground at one shot, so keen is the desire of possession!

The young had the head of a fawn-colour, but I took little more notice of it, depositing the two birds under a log, whence I intended to remove them on my return, for the purpose of drawing and describing them. I then proceeded on my excursion to a lake a few miles distant. On coming back, what was my mortification, when I found that some quadruped had devoured both! My punishment was merited.

The Mississippi Kite arrives in Lower Louisiana about the middle of April, in small parties of five or six, and confines itself to the borders of deep woods, or to those near plantations, not far from the shores of the rivers, lakes, or bayous. It never moves into the interior of the country, and in this respect resembles the *Falco furcatus*. Plantations lately cleared, and yet covered with tall dying girted trees, placed near a creek or bayou, seem to suit it best.

Its flight is graceful, vigorous, protracted, and often extended to a great height, the Fork-tailed Hawk being the only species that can compete with it. At times it floats in the air, as if motionless, or sails in broad regular circles, when, suddenly closing its wings, it slides along to some distance, and renews its curves. Now it sweeps in deep and long undulations, with the swiftness of an arrow, passing almost within touching distance of a branch on which it has observed a small lizard, or an insect it longs for, but from which it again ascends disappointed. Now it is seen to move in hurried zig-zags, as if pursued by a dangerous enemy, sometimes seeming to turn over and over like a Tumbling Pigeon. Again it is observed flying round the trunk of a tree to secure large insects, sweeping with astonishing velocity. While travelling, it moves in the desultory manner followed by Swallows; but at other times it is seen soaring at a great elevation among the large flocks of Carrion Crows and Turkey-Buzzards, joined by the Fork-tailed

Hawk, dashing at the former, and giving them chase, as if in play, until these cowardly scavengers sweep downwards, abandoning this to them disagreeable sport to the Hawks, who now continue to gambol undisturbed. When in pursuit of a large insect or a small reptile, it turns its body sidewise, throws out its legs, expands its talons, and generally seizes its prey in an instant. It feeds while on wing, apparently with as much ease and comfort, as when alighted on the branch of a tall tree. It never alights on the earth; at least I have never seen it do so, except when wounded, and then it appears extremely awkward. It never attacks birds or quadrupeds of any kind, with the view of destroying them for food, although it will chase a fox to a considerable distance, screaming loudly all the while, and soon forces a Crow to retreat to the woods.

The nest of this species is always placed in the upper branches of the tallest trees. I thought it gave the preference to those tall and splendid magnolias and white oaks, which adorn our Southern States. The nest resembles that of the dilapidated tenement of the Common American Crow, and is formed of sticks slightly put together, along with branches of Spanish moss (*Usnea*), pieces of vine bark, and dried leaves. The eggs are two or three, almost globular, of a light greenish tint, blotched thickly over with deep chocolate-brown and black. Only one brood is raised in the season, and I think the female sits more than half the time necessary for incubation. The young I also think obtain nearly the full plumage of the old bird before they depart from us, as I have examined these birds early in August, when the migration was already begun, without observing much difference in their general colour, except only in the want of firmness in the tint of the young ones.

Once, early in the month of May, I found a nest of this bird placed on a fine tall white oak near a creek, and observed that the female was sitting with unceasing assiduity. The male I saw bring her food frequently. Not being able to ascend the tree, I hired a Negro, who had been a sailor for some years, to climb it and bring down the eggs or young. This he did by first mounting another tree, the branches of which crossed the lower ones of the oak. No sooner had he reached the trunk of the tree on which the nest was placed, than the male was seen hovering about and over it in evident displeasure, screaming and sweeping towards the intruder the higher he advanced. When he attained the branch on which the nest was, the female left her charge, and the pair, infuriated at his daring, flew with such velocity, and passed so close to him, that I expected every moment to see him struck by them. The black tar, however, proceeded quietly, reached the nest, and took out the eggs, apprising me that there were three. I requested him to bring them down with care, and to throw off the nest, which he did. The

poor birds, seeing their tenement cast down to the ground, continued sweeping around us so low and so long, that I could not resist the temptation thus offered of shooting them.

The Mississippi Kite is by no means a shy bird, and one may generally depend on getting near it when alighted; but to follow it while on wing were useless, its flight being usually so elevated, and its sweeps over a field or wood so rapid and varied, that you might spend many hours in vain in attempting to get up with it. Even when alighted, it perches so high, that I have sometimes shot at it, without producing any other effect than that of causing it to open its wings and close them again, as if utterly ignorant of the danger to which it had been exposed, while it seemed to look down upon me quite unconcerned. When wounded, it comes to the ground with great force, and seldom attempts to escape, choosing rather to defend itself, which it does to the last, by throwing itself on its back, erecting the feathers of its head, screaming loudly in the manner of the Pigeon Hawk, disgorging the contents of its stomach, stretching out its talons, and biting or clenching with great vigour. It is extremely muscular, the flesh tough and rigid.

These birds at times search for food so far from the spot where their nest has been placed, that I have on several occasions been obliged to follow their course over the woods, as if in search of a wild bee's hive, before I could discover it. There is scarcely any perceptible difference between the sexes as to size, and in colour they are precisely similar, only the female has less of the ferruginous colour on her primaries than the male. The stomach is thin, rugous, and of a deep orange colour.

MISSISSIPPI KITE, *Falco Mississippiensis*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. iii. p. 80.

FALCO PLUMBEUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 90.

MISSISSIPPI KITE, *Falco plumbeus*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 108, vol. v. p. 374.

Adult male.

Wings long and pointed, the third quill longest. Tail long, straight, retuse.

Bill black, as are the cere, lore, and a narrow band round the eye. Iris blood-red. Feet purplish, the scutella deep red; claws black. The head, the neck all round, and the under parts in general bluish-white. The back and wing-coverts are of a dark leaden colour, the ends of the secondary coverts white. The primaries black, margined externally with bright bay; the tail also deep black, as is the rump.

Length 14 inches; extent of wings 36; bill along the ridge $\frac{11}{12}$, along the edge $\frac{11}{12}$; tarsus $1\frac{3}{4}$.

Adult Female.

The female differs little from the male in colour, and is not much larger.

Length 15 inches.

GENUS VIII.—NAUCLERUS, *Fig.* SWALLOW-TAILED HAWK.

Bill short, wide at the base, much compressed toward the end; upper mandible with the dorsal line decurved from the base, the sides slightly convex, the edges with a slight festoon, the tip narrow and acute; lower mandible with the angle very wide, the dorsal line straightish, the tip rounded and declinate. Nostrils round, with a central papilla. Head rather large, roundish, flattened; neck short; body compact. Feet short; tarsus very short, thick, scaly all round; toes scutellate above, scabrous beneath, with pointed papillæ; claws rather long, curved, acuminate. Plumage blended, glossy. Wings extremely long, pointed, the third quill longest; secondaries short. Tail extremely long, very deeply forked.

THE SWALLOW-TAILED HAWK.

+ NAUCLERUS FURCATUS, *Linn.*

PLATE XVIII.—MALE.

The flight of this elegant species of Hawk is singularly beautiful and protracted. It moves through the air with such ease and grace, that it is impossible for any individual, who takes the least pleasure in observing the manners of birds, not to be delighted by the sight of it whilst on wing. Gliding along in easy flappings, it rises in wide circles to an immense height, inclining in various ways its deeply forked tail, to assist the direction of its course, dives with the rapidity of lightning, and, suddenly checking itself, reascends, soars away, and is soon out of sight. At other times a flock of these birds, amounting to fifteen or twenty individuals, is seen hovering around the trees. They dive in rapid succession amongst the branches, glancing along the trunks, and seizing in their course the insects and small lizards of which they are in quest. Their motions are astonishingly rapid, and the deep curves which they describe, their sudden doublings and cross-

Mississippi Kite.

Audubon, John James. 1840. "The Mississippi Kite, *Ictinia plumbeus*, Gmel. [Pl. 17]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 73–78. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319130>.

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