THE **HEAT** IS **ON**

Species feeling the effects of climate change

Everglade Snail Kite

Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus

Region:
Southeast

Area affected:
Lake Okeechobee

Climatic change:
Severe weather

Impact:
Nesting failure

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Red eyes, orange face and feet and a wickedly curved bill give the Everglade snail kite a fierce and distinctive appearance. The bill, in fact, is this bird's essential tool for accessing its namesake primary food source: snails. The kites use their curved bills to pry apple snails, large aquatic mollusks, out of their shells. Given this dietary specialization, snail kites spend almost all their time near the edges of lakes and wetlands, seeking snails in the shallows. They nest in small trees or clumps of sheltered vegetation, often on small islands, where the young are safer from predators. Crow-sized relatives of hawks and eagles, snail kites are widely found from Mexico to Argentina. Everglade snail kites are the only U.S. representative, a subspecies confined to south Florida. Although never common, this subspecies was down to just 10 birds in the 1960s and was included on the original list of federal endangered species in 1967.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

Recovery from near-extinction has been a long, slow process for the Everglade snail kite. Ever increasing urban development, agriculture and water management activities have drained, fragmented and polluted freshwater habitats in south Florida. Climate factors have also impeded recovery. Snail numbers and availability depend on moderate water levels. When severe drought in south Florida dried out nearshore habitats in 2000 and 2001, the kite population plummeted from over 3,000 to fewer than 1,400. In contrast, the return of wet conditions in the mid-2000s may have been too much of a good thing. High water levels, combined with sediment and algal blooms flushed into lakes by heavy precipitation, made it difficult for the kites to locate their prey. **In 2017, springtime drought caused an 80 percent decline in nesting from the previous year, and Hurricane Irma destroyed every single one of the 44 active snail kite nests on Lake Okeechobee.**

References

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