Kites

The species included in this group are placed together for convenience and do not reflect any taxonomic affinity.

Kite is the common name for particular raptors in the family Accipitridae. Of these, black kites and yellow-billed kites are true kites.

Kites are divided up into 3 subfamilies:

- Elaninae—the white-tailed kites
- Milvinae—the true kites
- Perninae—the fork-tailed kites

Kites are small to medium-sized raptors. They are both bold and graceful. Elanus kites hunt mainly by hovering and perch-hunting, mostly taking rodents. Milvus kites forage mainly by scavenging or dawdling around food sources, such as termite emergencies, rubbish dumps, etc.
# Black-winged kite - *Elanus caeruleus*

## Vital statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Vital statistics</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wingspan</strong></td>
<td>84 cm [34 in].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
<td>200-270 g [7-9.5 oz] ♂ 220-295 g [7.7-10.4 oz] ♀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preferred prey</strong></td>
<td>Rodent specialists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incubation period</strong></td>
<td>30-33 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clutch size</strong></td>
<td>2-6 eggs (usually 3-4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>Very common resident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nesting site</strong></td>
<td>Treetops, usually <em>Acacia</em> (Vachellia) species or other thorn trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nestling period</strong></td>
<td>35 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hunting success</strong></td>
<td>20% (of each attempt).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habitat</strong></td>
<td>Open grassland and Savanna woodland.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Conservation Status

- **Globally threatened**
- **Extinct**
- **Extinct in the wild**
- **Critically Endangered**
- **Endangered**
- **Vulnerable**
- **Near Threatened**
- **Least Concern**
- **Data Deficient**
Description

**Black-winged kites** (*Elanus caeruleus*) are far more common and are the most likely species of the group to be encountered. For this reason, they have been chosen to be examined in detail.

**Until March of 2009,** this component dealt with **black-shouldered kites**, not **black-winged kites**. This was due to yet another taxonomic review of the group. As a result, the name black-shouldered kite has now been bestowed exclusively on *Elanus axillaris*, **Australian kites** of remarkably similar description, while *Elanus caeruleus* have been renamed **black-winged kites**.
These diminutive little raptors are some of the best-known raptors in southern Africa and are very commonly seen. They have pure white underparts, grey upperparts, and distinctive black shoulder patches, hence their name. Their eyes are red, bills black, feet and legs yellow. They have long wings. Their white, short, square tails are visible in flight, and they are not forked as in the typical kites of the genus Milvus.

When perched on powerlines, they often adjust their wings and jerk their tails up and down as if to balance themselves. The sexes are indistinguishable. Their large forward-facing dark red eyes placed under bony shelves that shade them are distinctive. Their velvety plumage and zygodactyl feet are characteristics they share with owls. The juveniles of the species have basically the same plumage pattern, but their upperparts are washed with brown, as is the top of their heads and necks. Their eyes are also grey-brown. Change to the adult plumage takes about a year.
Diet and feeding

Black-winged kites feed primarily on rodents and have 2 different hunting strategies:

- Striking prey from a perch
- Striking prey from a hovering position

While using the perching tactic, the birds change their vantage point every 10-20 minutes. When they take to the wing, they soar to 30-40 m [100-130 ft] and begin hovering. They will hover for only 10-20 seconds over one point while carefully scrutinising the ground and then break off to repeat the process in another position. When they spot a rodent while hovering, they begin their strike gently, only speeding up a few metres from the ground, plunging headfirst at 90°, and only at the last moment extending their talons for the kill.

When striking from a perch, they merely drop onto their prey at the desired angle. Roughly 70% of their time is spent hunting from a perch and 30% hovering. Their success rate is in the order of one successful kill from 5 attempts. Black-winged kites specialise in small rodents concentrating on 3 species. These are Angoni vlei rats (Otomys angoniensis), striped mice (Rhabdomys pumilio) and multimammate mice (Mastomys coucha). This is also the order of their preference.
When these particular prey items are not available, black-winged kites will also kill lizards, insects, and very occasionally doves or tortoises. However, these alternative prey species only consist of less than 2% of their diet. Black-winged kites are often nomadic and opportunists, moving from prey scarce areas to abundant prey areas. Some ringed birds have been recovered over 900 km [340 mi] from their initial ringing area. However, this is probably an exception. It is important to remember that this bird is only some 250 g [10 oz]. The species will always remain a favourite with bird watchers and enthusiasts alike.
Courtship and reproduction

Black-winged kites display quite elaborate courtship rituals. This consists of the male doing several circling passes around the female while both are in flight. During this movement, the male might dive down at the female who side slips out of his way or turns and presents her talons at his.

This all occurs to the accompaniment of much calling by the male. He may also fly around her with his legs dangling together with exaggerated stiff wing beats.

Their nesting sites are variable, but the top of thorn trees are favoured when available. One consistent feature of all the sites, irrespective of their height, diameter, protection, and construction, is that they are easily accessible from the air. Although both birds play an equal part in nest construction, females do not hunt during this period but rely on males to bring prey.

Breeding occurs throughout the year in southern Africa, but has different peaks depending on the locality. For example, in the Lowveld area, breeding peaks from August-November and February-May.
Male black-winged kites defend territories to which they attract females and continue to occupy them after the females have left. These areas may be up to 1 km [± 0.5 mi] around their nest and are defended from conspecifics and other smaller raptors. Females tend to wander around and select the best available territories.

Eggs are laid approximately 24 days after copulation. Between 3-6 eggs are laid at 1 to 2-day intervals. Breeding is also variable and may be correlated with prey abundance. They may breed twice or 3 times in a season and not at all the following season. During a rodent plague, several successive broods were recorded.

Incubation seems to be the sole responsibility of females, while males continue to feed females. Incubation averages at around 31 days. There does not seem to be any sibling aggression, although they all compete for food from their parents. The nestling stage averages around 35 days, and at about 10 days on the wing, the females desert them, and the males care for them, feeding them in flight. They may remain with him for up to 3 months.
Yellow-billed kite- *Milvus aegyptius*

**Vital statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wingspan</td>
<td>160-180 cm [62.9-31.4 in].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>450-850 g [15.8-29.9 oz]♂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>750-1076 g [26.4-37.9 oz]♀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred prey</td>
<td>Wide range of animal and insect prey. Much of it is scavenged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incubation period</td>
<td>37-38 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutch size</td>
<td>1-3 eggs, usually 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Most are intra-African breeding migrants. Arriving in South Africa from July and depart in March, sometimes as late as May.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nesting site</td>
<td>Nest usually placed in a thickly foliaged tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nestling period</td>
<td>45-50 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitat</td>
<td>Almost all woodland habitats, incl. parks in suburbia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conservation Status**

- **Globally threatened**
- **Extinct (EX)**
- **Extinct in the wild (EW)**
- **Critically Endangered (CR)**
- **Endangered (EN)**
- **Vulnerable (VU)**
- **Near Threatened (NT)**
- **Least Concern (LC)**
- **Data Deficient (DD)**
Description

As suggested by their name, **yellow-billed kites** (*Milvus aegyptius*) are easily recognised by their **entirely yellow bills**, unlike **black kites** (*Milvus migrans*), which are present in Africa as visitors during the Northern Hemisphere winter. However, immature yellow-billed kites resemble black kites of the corresponding age. Feather colouration is **dark brown**, and their tails are **V-shaped**.

Graeme Mitchley
Diet and feeding

They are found in almost all habitats, including parks in suburbia, but rare in the arid Namib and Karoo. They feed on a wide range of small vertebrates and insects, much of which is scavenged.

A yellow-billed kite fights with a hamerkop to steal his fish meal. In this case, the hamerkop won the battle and enjoyed its meal shortly after the yellow-billed kite left the area.
Courtship and reproduction

Yellow-billed kites are **monogamous**, **territorial** and **solitary nesters**. They perform **elaborate courtship displays**. The male follows the female while calling and flying acrobatically. The male then soars high up in the air before he dives at the female, who rolls on her back to present her talons so that they can lock.

**Nests are built by both sexes**, consisting of bowl-shaped platforms made of sticks. They are lined with various materials, such as skin, hair, dung, paper, scraps of cloth or rarely green leaves. Nests are typically placed on the main stems in the canopies of large trees, such as *Euphorbia*. The egg-laying season is from **August-December**, peaking from **September-October**. **1-3 eggs** are laid. Females mainly incubate the eggs for about **37-38 days**. The males may take over so that the females can go out to forage.

For the first **5-6 days** of their lives, chicks are brooded constantly by the female. During this time, the male provides all the food. When they become about **a month old**, the female helps him provide food for their chicks. They leave the nest to clamber around branches at about **40 days old**, taking their first flight a few days later.
Conservation status

Yellow-billed kites are mainly *intra-African breeding migrants*, present in southern Africa from *July-March* and sometimes as late as *May*. They are *generally common*. There are *no threats* to yellow-billed kites, as stated by the IUCN, due in part to the fact they have not yet been separated from *black kites*.

Graeme Mitchley
Buzzards

7 southern African species have been allocated to the group of birds known as buzzards.

These include:

- **Augur buzzard** - *Buteo augur*
- **Common buzzard** - *Buteo buteo*
- **European honey-buzzard** - *Pernis apivorus*
- **Forest buzzard** - *Buteo trizonatus*
- **Jackal buzzard** - *Buteo rufofuscus*
- **Lizard buzzard** - *Kaupifalco monogrammicus*
- **Red-necked buzzard** - *Buteo auguralis*

![Common buzzard - Buteo buteo](image-url)
Attempting to select which of these species to describe in detail provided a few problems. Firstly, the *lizard buzzard* is, in fact, not a buzzard at all taxonomically, and many modern authors prefer to place it with the *goshawks*. It was even earlier placed with the *eagles*.

**Forest buzzards** are rare birds to see, and most visitors are unlikely to meet them. In addition, common, European honey, auger and long-legged buzzards are not resident species but rather summer migrants.

However, for those just starting their acquaintance with raptors, common and jackal buzzards will most likely provide the first encounter during the summer months.

The description for common buzzards is also basically a description of the forest buzzards. These birds are also interesting, as 3 basic plumage forms can characterise adults. The most common is a brown form, but individuals may be very much darker in the 2nd form, and thirdly a russet form can be seen.

*Common buzzard*- *Buteo buteo*

![Common buzzard](https://example.com/common-buzzard.jpg)
## Common buzzard—*Buteo buteo*

### Vital statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wingspan</strong></td>
<td>109-140 cm [43-55 in].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
<td>640 g [22.5 oz] ♂&lt;br&gt;820 g [29 oz] ♀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preferred prey</strong></td>
<td>Mainly insects, also rodents, reptiles and occasionally birds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>Very common non-breeding Palearctic migrant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habitat</strong></td>
<td>Savanna woodland and forest when in southern Africa. Also, agricultural lands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home range</strong></td>
<td>Summer migrants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conservation Status

Globally threatened

- **EX**: Extinct
- **EW**: Extinct in the wild
- **CR**: Critically Endangered
- **EN**: Endangered
- **VU**: Vulnerable
- **NT**: Near Threatened
- **LC**: Least Concern
- **DD**: Data Deficient
Description

For the most part, common buzzards (Buteo buteo) are medium brown with an indistinct whitish band across their chests. Above this band, their plumage is streaked or smudged, and below it is banded. Irrespective of which variation their main plumage is, their eyes are brown, while their ceres, legs and feet are yellow. Their bills are black. Their tails are also always pale rufous above and have a fine dark-brown barring with a broader band near the tip. This is one of the key characteristics that distinguish adults from juveniles.

Although the plumage of juveniles is also variable, their full breast is vertically streaked and not barred. Their eyes are also pale yellow.
Diet and feeding

Common buzzards hunt from a perch, by simply dropping down gently onto their prey. They are generalist predators which hunt a wide variety of prey given the opportunity. They will take anything from small rodents to small birds, lizards, snakes, frogs and even insects. Insectivorous prey mainly includes larger beetles, locusts, breeding termites and caterpillars.

They are also mostly silent and solitary. Individuals seen together calling or performing flight displays are likely to be our resident forest buzzards. Since they are non-breeding migrants, details of their reproduction are not relevant as they are never seen in southern Africa.
Flight and migration

As already mentioned, being Palearctic migrants, these birds are summer migrants to southern Africa, coming from the Northern Hemisphere. Common buzzards breed in Finland and eastwards to Mongolia. Being the very successful species that they are, witnessing their migration in their large numbers is truly spectacular. Like all other raptors, these buzzards utilise warm thermals in flight. However, these air currents do not form over water bodies, and the birds make large detours to not fly over water. Therefore, instead of crossing the Mediterranean sea, they fly over Israel to get to and from Africa.

One count had over 315 800 buzzards coming through in one spring. These birds are resident here from around late September to early April. Their round-trip journey is approximately 26 000 km [16 100 mi].

Wilfried Hähner
### Jackal buzzard - *Buteo rufofuscus*

#### Vital statistics

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wingspan</strong></td>
<td>127-143 cm [50-56.2 in].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♂</td>
<td>970 g [34.2 oz]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♀</td>
<td>1340 g [47.2 oz]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preferred prey</strong></td>
<td>Mainly mammals up to the size of hares, also birds, reptiles, frogs and insects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incubation period</strong></td>
<td>39-40 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clutch size</strong></td>
<td>2 eggs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>Fairly common residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nesting site</strong></td>
<td>Most nests are built on cliff ledges, occasionally in trees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nestling period</strong></td>
<td>60 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Habitat</strong></td>
<td>Hilly and mountainous regions from sea level up to 3000 m [9842.52 ft].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Conservation Status

- **Globally threatened**
  - EX: Extinct
  - EW: Extinct in the wild
  - CR: Critically Endangered
  - EN: Endangered
  - VU: Vulnerable
  - NT: Near Threatened
  - LC: Least Concern
  - DD: Data Deficient
Description

**Jackal buzzards** *(Buteo ruffuscus)* are 1 of the 2 larger *Buteo* species native to Africa, alongside their close cousins, **augur buzzards**. Adults may measure **44-60 cm** [17-24 in] in total length. **Wingspans** in jackal buzzards range from **127-143 cm** [50-56.2 in], with an average of **131.9 cm** [51.9 in].

Adult jackal buzzards are strikingly plumaged and arguably of the most ‘handsome’ buzzards. They are almost black above with rufous **tails**. Their **primary flight feathers** are blackish and their **secondaries** off-white, both barred with black. Below their **chins** and around their **throats** is mainly chestnut. The rest of their **underparts** and **underwing coverts** are rich rufous but with contrasting black abdomens with faint white bars.

Their **flight feathers** present a **large white panel from below**, contrasting with black on their **hands** and black on the tips that form a dark trailing edge to their **wings**. Beyond their unmistakable colours, jackal buzzards have very short **tails**, broad **wings**, bulky **bodies** and **large bills** compared to most other buzzards.
**Juveniles** are mainly brown above and a somewhat washed out rufous-buff brown below, often manifesting worn feathers that appear as lighter buffy or whitish streaking. Their **tails** are usually buff-brown, with or without somewhat creamy pale tips. The **underwings** of **juveniles** have black tips and a whitish panel similar to adults, but the inside of their **wings** is rufous-buff (similar to their body feathers) streaked with brown.

Occurring geographically with jackal buzzards only in Namibia, **augur buzzards** are usually distinctly paler at every stage of development (especially lacking the rich underside tones of adults). However, both species have a melanistic form (as far as we know, rarer in jackal than augur buzzards). These forms are very similar in appearance and may only be told apart by melanistic augurs having slight dark streaking on their white wing panels.

Although unlikely, **juvenile jackal buzzards** may be confused with **juvenile bateleurs**, given their short rufous tails. However, bateleurs have larger heads and are heavier set in build. Bateleurs also have a distinct and particular head, wing and body shape. They have obvious and distinct colours as adults. **Juvenile bateleurs may be confused with similar-looking brown jackal buzzards**, but they are much duskier below with somewhat differing wing colours on their bulging wings.

Jackal buzzards have calls of sharp, barking quality, weeah ka-ka-ka or kyaahh-ka-ka-ka. **Female jackal buzzards’ voices** are deeper than those of males. Their calls are reminiscent of those of black-backed jackals and are believed to be the source of their common name. They have lower tones than the calls of **forest buzzards**, and their calls are very different from the harsh crowing of **augur buzzards**. Jackal buzzard calls are also reminiscent of the calls of **American red-tailed hawks**.
Diet and feeding

Jackal buzzards feed mainly on small ground mammals, especially rodents. Other prey items may include snakes, lizards, ground-feeding birds such as sandgrouse and gamebirds (or alternately nestlings and fledgelings of other birds), insects, and road-kills. Typically, these raptors ‘still-hunt’ by dropping onto their prey from a perch (often trees or roadside poles or posts). They take their prey almost exclusively on bare ground, including roads. They may also hunt by soaring or periodically hovering or hanging on updrafts.

A study from Grahamstown, South Africa, found the prey around a particular nest to consist of:

- 2 golden moles
- Four-striped grass mice (8 items)
- Various rat species (21 items)

Based on this, it seems jackal buzzards mainly take small mammals during the nesting cycle. They then switch to largely carrion-based diets during the non-breeding season.
Jackal buzzards have been recorded at various carrion sites (including many sheep and goat carcasses and placenta). There have also been many reports of them taking road-killed hares, springhares, springbok and steenbok. Despite being often recorded at carrion, the numerous scavengers in their range (largely vultures, jackals and occasionally hyaenas) are larger and often aggressive towards other scavengers. Therefore, jackal buzzards either only come to carrion when other scavengers are done feasting or are entirely absent. They have an advantage in being less shy towards humans than larger raptors and scavengers.

They may be able to come to road-kills more quickly and gain an advantage in accessing large carcasses that they may not be able to penetrate without larger scavengers opening them up first. Larger and more dangerous live prey recorded to be taken by jackal buzzards includes adult birds such as francolins and marsh owls, adult puff adders, adult greater cane rats and largely or exclusively the young of various mongoose, monitor lizards and Cape hyraxes.
Courtship and reproduction

Pairs have **noisy aerial displays**, including outside the breeding season. However, the aerial displays of pairs on territories tend to be much less dramatic than those of **augur buzzards**, usually confined to circling or gentle stooping. The breeding season peaks in **July-December** but can range from as early as **May** to as late as **March**. Large stick nests are built in trees or on cliffs. They are often reused and made bigger in subsequent seasons. At first construction, their nests average about **60-70 cm** [24-28 in] across and **35 cm** [14 in] deep. However, they can easily exceed **1 m** [3.3 ft] in diameter with repeated uses. **2 creamy or bluish-white eggs** (or very rarely **3**) are laid at about **3-day intervals** and incubated by the female only, although food is brought to her by the male.

A survey of egg sizes shows they average **60.7-47.7 mm** [2.39-1.88 in] with a range in height of **57-64.9 mm** [2.24-2.56 in] and diameter of **45-50 mm** [1.8-2.0 in]. The eggs hatch in about **40 days**. After a further **56-60 days**, chicks can attempt flight. Their parents will attack intruders, including humans, who come too close to their nests. **Siblicide has been widely reported**, but, presumably, when food supply is ample, nests often produce **2 fledglings**.

At **70 days**, they become **independent** of their nests, but juvenile birds may still be seen with adult pairs for some time. Jackal buzzard breeding cycles are relatively **elongated**, and clutch sizes are relatively **small** compared to other temperate-zone **Buteo** species.

![Image of a kite](image.png)

**C:Sibylle Hähner**