

BIRDS

Status: Native Permanent Resident

PRAIRIE FALCON

(*Falco mexicanus*)

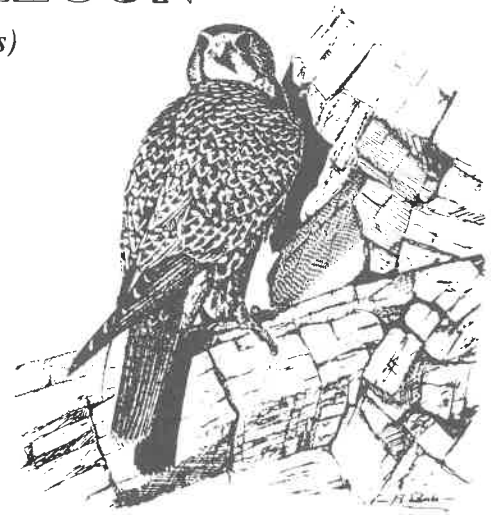
Description

The prairie falcon is a medium to large bird that frequents the plains of South Dakota. A mature prairie falcon averages 14 to 19 inches (35.5 to 47.5 cm) in length with wingspans approaching 3.5 feet (106.7 cm). Size can vary greatly in falcons. The female tends to be considerably larger than the male, in some cases a full one-third bigger. The smaller male balances the pair formation with his added aggressiveness.

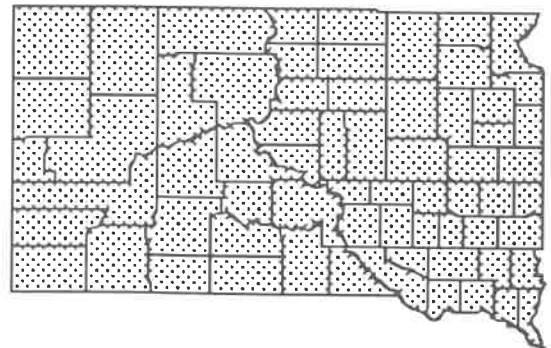
Adult prairie falcons are a pale brown to sandy brown across the top of their wings and back. The head is streaked with light areas around the face. A faint dark moustache appears on either side of the bill. Underneath the birds are creamy white with brown spotting or streaking on the breast and belly. When in flight, the falcon's underwing displays an area of dark feathers close to the body, a blackish patch in the wingpit. Falcons all have similar body shapes. They possess slender bodies, long tails and characteristic long, pointed wings.

Distribution

Prairie falcons are uncommon permanent residents in South Dakota. They are rare in the mountainous region of the Black Hills and east of the Missouri River. Birds can be abundant when suitable habitats for nesting and foraging



are present. Birds do migrate in the spring and fall, but some birds reside in South Dakota the entire year. The number of migrating birds can be solely dependent upon the severity of winter and the availability of food. Prairie falcons prefer the rough broken terrain found in western South Dakota. There the falcons find suitable nesting sites to raise their young.



Natural History

The prairie falcon is a locally common bird in the semi-arid open plains of South Dakota. These falcons prey chiefly on small birds and mammals, and on a variety of reptiles and insects. Prairie falcons hunt using low, rapid, searching flight, usually capturing prey on or near the ground. The prairie falcon, as do other species of falcons, swoops down upon its prey from behind. A similar species, the peregrine falcon, has been clocked at speeds of over 90 mph in their descents upon prey.

Prairie falcons nest on suitable cliff ledges, low ridges and banks found throughout western South Dakota. Nesting occurs in mid-April through July. Their nests are often found in rock crevices and sometimes in vacated stick nests left by other birds. An average female will raise four to five young, while

the male accomplishes most of the hunting for the family.

Conservation Measures

All birds of prey are protected by law. It is illegal to harm them or to disturb their nests. It is also against the law to have in your possession any artifacts from birds of prey, such as feathers, talons or preserved specimens. Injured hawks and owls should be reported to the S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Officials will arrange for birds that can be saved to be cared for at rehabilitation centers such as the Oahe Wildlife Center in Pierre run by Dr. Virginia Trexler-Myren or the Reptile Gardens Raptor Rehabilitation Center in Rapid City. See the great horned owl fact sheet for the educational resources of these centers.

References

SDOU, 1991. *The Birds of South Dakota*, NSU Press, Aberdeen, SD 57401.
National Geographic Society, 1987. *Birds of North America*, Mead Paper Co., New York, NY

Selected Resources For Teachers

Birds of Prey Coloring Book, Dover Publications, 31 E. 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11501. 42 species illustrated.
Birds of Prey Poster, vol. I & II. Windsor/Nature Discovery, 1000 S. Bertlesen #14, Eugene OR. 97402. These are full color, high quality posters with original artwork of hawks.
Birds of Prey Poster and Mobile set, Education Services, Division of Wildlife, S.D. Department Game, Fish and Parks, 3305 West South Street, Rapid City, SD 57702. This set includes a full color poster with hawk and owl pictures, plus a mobile and fact sheets.
Birds of Prey Zoobook Series, Wildlife Education Ltd., 9820 Willow Creek Rd., Suite 300, San Diego, CA. 92131. ISBN: 0-937934-01-1.
North American Birds of Prey, 1980, a book by William Mansell, with artwork by Gary Low. An informative text with beautiful paintings.

Written by:

Pat J. Buscher, Pierre, SD 57501. © 1996.

Illustration by:

Frank Beebe, taken from *The Complete Falconer* with permission of Hancock House Publishers, 1431 Harrison Ave., Blaine, WA 98230.

Reviewed by:

Dr. Dan Tallman, Department of Math and Natural Sciences, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD 57401.

Publication of the *Prairie Falcon* fact sheet was funded by the S.D. Department of Game, Fish, and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD.