

Prairie Falcon ***(Falco mexicanus)***



Photos by:
Unknown



Physical Description:

Like all falcons, the medium sized prairie falcon has a large head, notched beak, and "heavy shouldered" streamlined body. The back and upper wing are medium brown with pale bars and fringes on most feathers and the tail shows light barring underneath. The pale underbody is spotted on the belly and barred on the flanks. A large blackish patch on the white underwings distinguishes this from all other falcons. Sexes are similar in plumage; however the females have noticeably darker underwing patches. Narrow black malar stripes (mustache) extend from below the eyes downward along the chin.

Identification:

Length: 16 inches Wingspan: 40 inches

- Short, dark, hooked beak
- Dark brown cap and cheek
- Wingtips fall a couple inches short of tail on perched birds

- Pale supercilium and patch behind eye
- Pale face and throat with thin, dark mustache mark
- Dark axillars and underwing coverts
- Brown back with paler brown fringes
- Brown tail with very faint darker bands

Adult:

- Pale brown bars on darker back
- Whitish underparts have a few dark streaks on breast and spots on the belly

Immature:

- Lacks pale bars on back feathers making back appear darker
- More heavily streaked underparts

Hunting Strategies:

An efficient and specialized predator of medium-sized desert mammals, lizards and birds. Ground squirrels are the mainstay of the prairie falcon diet and provide the fat-rich calories needed to raise young during the nesting season. When ground squirrels move underground to escape summer heat and dryness, most prairie falcons leave their nesting areas in search of other prey - ground squirrels at higher elevations and birds, reptiles and insects. Horned larks and western meadowlarks are important prey items in winter.

Prairie falcons actively search for prey during flight and catch prey on or close to the ground after a long low angled swoop from above or a ground hugging flight that takes prey by surprise. Takes birds and insects in the air. Are known to cache prey within their nesting territory which may allow prairie falcons to maximize food intake and dampen fluctuations in prey availability during the breeding season.

Habitat and Range:

Dry grasslands and prairies, locally alpine tundra; suitable breeding habitat usually requires cliffs for nest sites; in winter, also cultivated fields and lake shores.

Summer Range:

Breeds from southwestern Canada southward to northern Mexico, eastward to Saskatchewan, western Nebraska, and western Texas.

Winter Range:

Winters from very southern Canada to central Mexico, farther eastward than breeding range, reaching Minnesota and eastern Texas.

Reproduction:

Nests primarily on cliff ledges, crevices or cavities. Does not build a nest structure; instead scrapes loose debris to form a small depression to hold eggs within a nest site. Most cliff nest sites have some overhang which provides protection from storms and hot sun. Prairie falcons also use abandoned nests of eagles, hawks or ravens. On occasion, nests in trees, on power line structures, on buildings and inside caves.

Nesting chronology in the NCA closely parallels that of ground squirrel populations. Prairie falcons arrive at nesting areas just as ground squirrels emerge from 6 months of aestivation in January or February, and they lay eggs when juvenile ground squirrels start to emerge from burrows. Prairie falcon young hatch when ground squirrel numbers are at peak, and they disperse by the time that ground squirrels aestivate in late June - early July to escape heat, dryness, and food shortages. Sexually mature by their second year.

Lifespan / Longevity:

Longest recorded - 17 years 3 months.

Behavior:

Pairs do not stay together during the nonbreeding season; pair bonds are established or renewed

after arrival on the breeding grounds. Widely separated nesting, post-nesting, and wintering areas. More a "wanderer" than a true "migrant". Seasonal movements reflect responses to changing food availability throughout the year. Birds leave Idaho desert nesting areas soon after fledging and move to higher elevations or more northern latitudes where prey (ground squirrels) do not aestivate to escape summer heat/dryness.

Flapping flight - short, rapid strokes with wings mostly below horizontal. Soars on flat wings with tail slightly fanned, and glides on flat wings or with wrists below body and wing-tips curved upward. Seems to prefer gliding over soaring; hovers occasionally.

Communication:

Common vocalization is the alarm/territorial call, described as a shrill kik-kik-kik. Call is generally harsher and deeper in the female. During courtship, both sexes emit a characteristic eechup call. Females emit a distinctive whine/wail when soliciting food or copulations from the male. Both give a chitter call during aggressive interactions.