

Liberty Wildlife Rehabilitation Foundation



Liberty Wildlife

Education Program's Natural History

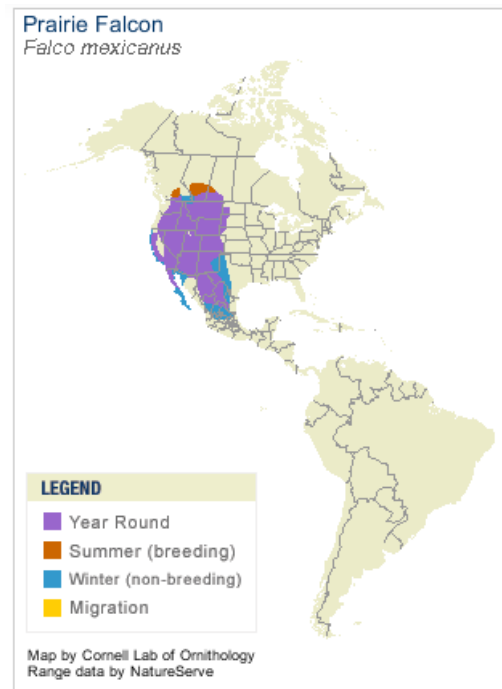


Prairie Falcon



Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*)

Range: Found only in western North America, the Prairie Falcon's range includes southwestern Canada, western United States and Baja California and northern Mexico. From mid June through August, juveniles head north or east from their nesting sites to the Great Plains where juvenile ground squirrels and meadowlarks or Horned Larks are abundant. In the fall, the Prairie Falcon will migrate short to moderate distances south, returning as early migrants to the north as early as mid-January through March but as late as May. There are an estimated 4,300 – 6,000 pairs in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. In their Canadian range, they are listed as Species at Risk or Sensitive Species (Wheeler, 2003). In the United States, the population is considered stable, if not increasing (University of Minnesota Raptor Center, Cornell). In Arizona, they are found generally in low- and moderate elevations during the winter and in the desert grasslands and chaparrals during the summer.



Habitat: The Prairie Falcons inhabit dry environments of open plains and shrub deserts with cliff formations at least 20 feet in height for nesting. Their habitat does not require a nearby source of water. They seek open areas that include mountain valleys, arid prairies and deserts, and agricultural and rural areas. Nesting sites are usually below the timberline elevation, but they have been found up to 12,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains and in alpine meadows as high as 14,000 feet.

Description: Prairie Falcons are medium sized falcons, similar in size to the peregrine falcons but are slimmer and have a longer tail. When perched, their wing tips do not reach the tail tip. They are 15 to 21 inches in length with average 40 inch wingspans. The plumage is similar between the sexes, except the females have noticeably darker, more heavily marked underwing patches (Snake River, Cornell). Additionally, the female will be larger and heavier than the male weighing an average of 1¾ pounds to the male's 1 pound. When perched, Prairie Falcons appear uniformly medium brown above and mostly white below. The back and upper wings are 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. Their pale, squarish head is often described as “blocky” in appearance and the dark eyes seem a little too large. The top and sides of the head are dark; the face has a distinctive white area between eye and ear-patch; and a white cheek with the black malar stripe (mustache) under the eyes characteristic of all falcons. The Prairie Falcon also has the falcon characteristic tooth-like projection on its short bluish beak that it uses to break the neck of the prey it captures with its talons

In flight, Prairie Falcons have light barring underneath their tail and a noticeable dark patch in their “armpits” - a feature not seen on any other North American falcon.

Prairie Falcons fly with shallow, stiff, powerful wing beats, and soar on flat wings with the tail slightly fanned. These falcons often fly low and fast over the ground in pursuit of prey. If wind is sufficient, Prairie Falcons will kite for short periods. Juveniles may briefly hover at low altitudes while searching for prey (Wheeler).

The common vocalization is that of the alarm/territorial call, described as a shrill “kik-kik-kik” or “kree-kree-kree,” higher in pitch than the Peregrine Falcon’s call. The female’s call is generally deeper and harsher. The call may be heard at

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Prairie_Falcon/id

Hunting/Prey: Because of their habitat, Prairie Falcons have to search a wide range for sparsely distributed prey. An efficient predator, it specializes in medium-sized mammals and birds. Rodents, small rabbits, small hares and small to medium-sized birds such as mourning doves and quail are its primary prey. During the breeding season, several species of ground squirrels are its primary food source since they provide fat-rich calories for the young. When the ground squirrels go underground to escape the summer heat, Prairie Falcons will leave the nesting area in search of other prey including snakes, lizards and insects. During the winter, Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks become the main prey.

The Prairie Falcon is both a perch and aerial hunter. From the perch, the falcon hunts in a direct, low-altitude flight flushing prey and then putting on a burst of speed and diving down to fly low to the ground to catch the prey. At other times, it will sit and wait for Northern Harriers or Red-tailed Hawks to flush prey and then pirate it. Hunting in flight, the Prairie Falcon may fly grabbing the prey from underneath, or fly in a low-level flight. Very rarely will the Prairie Falcon scavenge.

Breeding/Nesting: Typically, Prairie Falcons nest on a cliff face using a ledge, cavity, crevice, or an abandoned nest of eagles, hawks, or ravens. Less often, they will nest in trees, on power line structures or building or in caves (Cornell). Nesting will occur between February and July depending on latitude and elevation and last 3 to 4 months. During the breeding season, Prairie Falcons can be very aggressive in defending their territory and will exhibit little fear of humans.

The average clutch size numbers 4 to 5 eggs. The egg laying interval is about two days resulting in a 9 to 10 day egg laying period. The incubation is between 29 to 34 days. The female does all the nocturnal and 82% of the diurnal incubation. Young falcons leave the nest 5 to 6 weeks after hatching. Mortality rates of young Prairie Falcons are quite high, perhaps as much as 74% during their first year, much of this loss due to shooting. (Johnsgard)

Lifespan: The most common estimate of the average life expectancy of the Prairie Falcon is between 2 and 5 years, substantially lower than the Peregrine Falcon (Johnsgard & Cornell). Other estimates range from 13 to 20 years (Enderson, 1969; Denton, 1975).



Threats: Shooting by humans is the number one cause of death for Prairie Falcons, particularly for first-year birds (Cornell). Collisions with manmade objects, such as vehicles, wires, and fences, is the second leading cause of death in adult falcons. Loss of habitat and nesting degradation, and predation by Great Horned Owls and Golden Eagles also account for losses. Loss of habitat for the ground squirrel may also affect the population.

Other Prairie Falcon Facts:

- The Prairie Falcon has also been called the Bullet Hawk.
- The Latin name *Falco mexicanus* comes from the Latin word “falco,” meaning hook-shaped referring to the beak and talons and the Latinized word for Mexico where the bird was first collected for study.
- Typically, the Prairie Falcon is more active, nervous and aggressive than the peregrine falcon.
- Prairie Falcons and Peregrine Falcons are similar in size and can be distinguished from each other by color. The Prairie Falcon is brown and has dark “armpits” or dark patches under the wings, while the Peregrine is blue-gray and has a uniform underwing color pattern.
- The Prairie Falcon sometimes bathes in river shallows, but dust-bathing is probably more common than water-bathing, because of the general scarcity of standing water in its habitat
- The Prairie Falcon's diet of non-aquatic birds and rodents and reptiles helped it escape the widespread DDT-induced declines experienced by the Peregrine Falcon although some eggshell thinning was reported (Stephenson and Calcarone 1999).
- Prairie Falcons are widely considered the most aggressive of all raptors (Steenhof, 1998).
- The Snake River Birds of Prey Natural Conservation Area in Idaho was established in 1993 to preserve the nesting and foraging habitat for the largest known density of nesting Prairie Falcons.
- Male falcons are called “tiercels” and females are called “falcons.”
- Outward pointed, cone-shaped projections in the center of the round nostrils slow down the flow of air to allow fast flights without damaging the bird's lungs.
- The Prairie Falcon is traditionally considered a member of the “great” or “desert” falcon group that includes the Gyrfalcon, Lagger, Saker and Lanner falcons, all found in dry environments.
- Prairie Falcons cache prey in vegetation and rocky areas. The male and female will use separate sites with the female caching more than the male.
- Play behavior (carrying dried cow manure in its talons, repeatedly flying and tossing it up and forward and trying to catch it) has been observed (Cornell).
- Owls are particularly vulnerable to Prairie Falcon's aggressive defense of their territory. The falcons have been known to attack and sometimes kill both Great Horned Owls and Barn Owls
- There are 5 types of falcons found in the United States: Gyrfalcon, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon, Merlin, and American Kestrel.
- Because of their popularity with falconers, the Prairie Falcon is the second most commonly harvested raptor in the United States (Steenhof 1998).
- The following YouTube website shows a Prairie Falcon in flight:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P04Nnn83tx0>





Prairie Falcon
Falco mexicanus | Order FALCONIFORMES – Family FALCONIDAE

Adult female Prairie Falcon; Utah, June



Prairie Falcon
Falco mexicanus | Order FALCONIFORMES – Family FALCONIDAE

Nestling Prairie Falcons, Delle, UT (June 2001)

Typical cliff-side nest site -- here a "pothole" in eroded sandstone



Prairie Falcon
Falco mexicanus | Order FALCONIFORMES – Family FALCONIDAE

Adult male Prairie Falcon; Utah, June,



Ra

Ra was arrived at the Nature's Educators facility in Colorado in 2017 with an injured left wing. The injury required that the wing tip be amputated, classifying him as non-releasable. Ra was transferred to Liberty Wildlife in 2020 as an adult, where he became a member of our Education team.

(Ra was believed to rule in all parts of the created world: the sky, the Earth, and the underworld. He was the god of the sun, order, kings and the sky. Ra was portrayed as a falcon and shared characteristics with the sky-god Horus.)



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Sources: Raptors of Western North America by Brian Wheeler, Hawks, Eagles & Falcons of North America by Paul Johnsgard, The Peregrine Fund, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, University of Minnesota Raptor Center, Cascades Raptor Center, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, National Audubon Society Guides.