

FIELD NOTES

Evading the Peregrine Falcon

Dana Rohleder

In early October of 2003 I spent a week on Nantucket surf fishing not far from Great Point. Over the course of the week I saw 12 Peregrine Falcons and 5 Merlins, most of which were migrating. Some of the Peregrines may have been recounted because I believe there was at least one that stayed near Great Point for several days.

One day, a Merlin flew by 50 yards offshore followed about 100 yards back by a Peregrine. Then, oddly, the Merlin stopped abruptly and began to “hover,” similar to the way a Kestrel does, as the Peregrine closed. When the Peregrine was about to strike, the Merlin dove into the ocean! The Peregrine may have hit the bird when it was in the water, but I didn’t get a good look. The Peregrine made a quick turn and flew over the spot several times, but the Merlin was no longer visible on the surface. After several passes, the Peregrine left and the Merlin was not seen again, apparently resting in Davy Jones’s locker.

I find it odd that, with some fairly abundant scrub nearby, the Merlin sought refuge in the water. I would think that it would have been able to dive into the scrub and avoid the larger bird. Possibly it never knew the Peregrine was pursuing it, and it saw something interesting in the water and stopped to investigate, then it was surprised by the Peregrine ambush. 

Looking up to find a Peregrine “locked on” and closing for a kill is probably enough to panic nearly any bird. Under these circumstances, I wouldn’t be too surprised by whatever evasive action a bird might take. Some do head for the scrub. One summer on Penikese Island I heard the frantic chatter of a Barn Swallow overhead. It was flying at full speed nearly straight down with a Peregrine closing fast. Without any deviation it plunged straight into a Rosa rugosa (salt spray rose) bush and the Peregrine peeled off just a few feet behind with a great rush of wind in its wings. I never saw the swallow emerge again and was left to wonder if it had died on impact or was just making sure the coast was really clear.

Tom French

Banding Migrating Peregrine Falcons at Noman’s Land Island NWR

Norman Smith

Noman’s Land is a 628-acre island located approximately six miles SSW of Martha’s Vineyard. It has a long and rich history (French, T. 2002. Summary of Leach’s Storm-petrel Nesting on Penikese Island, MA, and a Report of Probable Nesting on Noman’s Land Island. *Bird Observer* 30 (3): 182-7.). From the beginning of World War II until 1996, various portions of the island were used as a military

target range. On June 26, 1998, the island was turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to become Noman's Land National Wildlife Refuge. However, because of the potential dangers of remaining military ordnance, the island remains closed to public access.

For many years Noman's Land has been recognized as a concentration area for fall migrants including raptors, most notably Peregrine Falcons. On a previous trip on October 16, 1998, I had seen nineteen Peregrines around the tall bluffs on the south side of the island, as well as a Cooper's Hawk, American Kestrel, Rough-legged Hawk, four Merlins, and seven Northern Harriers. On October 9 and 10, 2003, I made an overnight trip to Noman's Land with USFWS biologists to assess the importance of Noman's Land Island to migrating raptors, especially to Peregrine Falcons. The idea was to trap and band as many falcons as possible, to try to assess the number of raptors using the island. By capturing and banding the falcons, their overall condition could be examined, and the band could potentially identify them at other stopover points as they continued their journey south. The team included USFWS biologists Stephanie Koch, Janet Thibault, Monica Williams, and USFWS volunteer Don Manchester, along with Vin Zolo and me from the Massachusetts Audubon Trailside Museum in the Blue Hills Reservation.

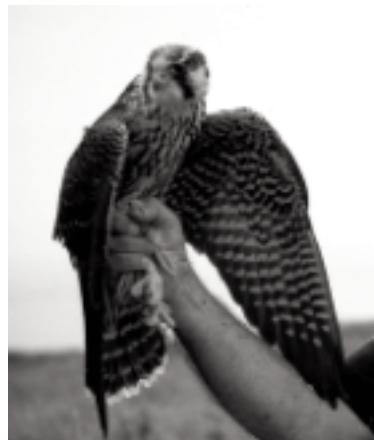
Upon arriving on the island, Vin Zolo and I loaded up the ATV and made our way to the tallest bluff, where on October 16, 1998, I observed the aforementioned nineteen Peregrines, capturing and banding seven of them. On our way to the bluff we observed two Cooper's Hawks, four Northern Harriers, and one hatch-year Peregrine Falcon. As we approached the base of the bluff, we watched a large adult Peregrine take a bath in a nearby freshwater pond. We parked the ATV and made our way through the dense poison ivy to the top of the bluff. As we looked over the top of the bluff, the flat grassy area I had used in 1998 had disappeared, apparently a casualty of the last big storm surge. From the top of the bluff the view was still spectacular, and we watched several Peregrines riding the updrafts; however, the remaining area wasn't large enough to set up the blind and nets. We got back on the ATV and proceeded along the bluffs to try to find a place to set up, all the while watching Peregrines riding the updrafts of the bluffs and then heading out over the water and disappearing from view. There were no usable sites along the bluffs, so we went to the top of a sand dune in the middle of the island.

After setting up the observation blind and net, we lured in and captured a Cooper's Hawk. The next bird we captured was a hatch-year female Peregrine with a full crop. Little did we know at the time that we would have numerous encounters with this bird over the course of the day! We were watching Peregrines fly down the island until they reached the bluffs to catch the updrafts and then circle upward, gaining altitude, and one after another head out over the water to their next destination. Groups of Peregrines would build up over the bluffs, with as many as eleven birds in a group, prior to their departure from the island. As another Peregrine made a pass at the lure, a second Peregrine right on its tail landed on the trap and was captured. Upon removing the bird from the trap, I noticed it was banded, and after checking the number realized it was the hatch-year female with the full crop we just banded. Moments later a small hatch-year Peregrine made a pass at the lure followed by a big adult bird that was traveling so fast we could hear the noise generated from

the air turbulence she created before we could even see her. Seconds later, a third bird flew over the lure, looped around, came in again, and was captured. It was that same bird we captured earlier. She was sternly lectured about coming back to the trap and released. Several minutes later two more Peregrines made a pass at the lure, with the trailing bird being captured. It was that same bird again! So we placed her in the weighing can in the blind to give us a chance at some other birds. After a few minutes she escaped from the can and momentarily stared at us in the blind before she flew out the door and was gone.

We had numerous Peregrines come in and make passes but only managed to capture that same female two more times. She was an extremely aggressive bird and wouldn't let any other Peregrines land on our lure; we captured her six times that day. However, she did allow us to lure in and capture a Northern Harrier. Why couldn't she have been one of the many Peregrines to leave the island and continue their journey south that day? By the end of the day we had observed over fifty Peregrines pass through the island as well as fifteen Northern Harriers, a Merlin, Sharp-shinned Hawk, two Cooper's Hawks, and a Red-tailed Hawk. The next morning we set up early and had several harriers make passes at the lure. We managed to capture two Peregrines and watched several others make passes. Unlike the previous day, the Peregrines that we observed were eating or sitting on the bluffs for most of the day, and we watched only one leave the island.

Being there to document the more than fifty Peregrines that passed through Noman's Island on October 9, and eighteen observed feeding and resting on October 10, was an incredible experience. There is no doubt the trip was well worth the nasty case of poison ivy I brought home from the island; this plagued me for the next two months. Hopefully, this unique National Wildlife Refuge will continue to be an important stopover point for Peregrine Falcons and other migrants for years to come.



THAT PERSISTANT PEREGRINE BY NORMAN SMITH

“Black” Brant in Plymouth

Wayne R. Petersen

The taxonomy of Brant with dark bellies has recently received attention in the literature [e.g., Buckley, P.A. and S. S. Mitra. 2002. Three Geese Resembling “Gray-bellied Brant”/“Lawrence’s Brant” from Long Island, New York, *North American Birds* 56 (4): 502-507]. Consequently, the following note may be of interest to birders in Massachusetts.

While leading a field trip area for the Joppa Flats Education Center in Plymouth on October 25, 2003, I observed an adult “Black” Brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) at

Nelson Street Beach on the Plymouth waterfront. The “Black” Brant was feeding on the soccer field adjacent to the beach parking lot, among a flock of about 200 “Atlantic” Brant (*B. b. hrota*) at approximately 2:30 p.m. The bird was also observed in flight and sleeping on the beach flats during a falling tide. The Brant in question was completely and solidly black below, all the way to the vent area, with scarcely a discernable contrast between the dark chest and what is typically a brownish-gray belly on light-bellied “Atlantic” Brant. This lack of contrast between the dark chest and lower breast and belly is one of the premiere characteristics of Brant belonging to the western Arctic and Alaskan populations of North America. In addition to having solid black underparts, the white marking on the bird’s neck was completely connected on the front, as well as being more extensive on the sides, than is typical of “Atlantic” Brant. Also, the dorsal color was noticeably darker (almost charcoal in tone) than that of adjacent Brant. Finally, the strongly contrasting, vertically barred, black-and-white flanks of the “Black” Brant provided sharp contrast to the blackish under parts, giving the flanks a striking black and white appearance.

In addition to the adult “Black” Brant described above, a juvenile bearing similar characteristics was seemingly in attendance with the adult (see accompanying photo). Knowing the propensity with which juvenile waterfowl routinely accompany their parents during a first autumn migration, it seems reasonable to suspect that these birds represented at least a partial family group.

The western race of the Brant (*B. b. nigricans*) has been reliably recorded and collected in Massachusetts on at least a dozen previous occasions, including a bird observed at this same location as recently as early November 2000 [see *Bird Observer* 29 (2)]. The race *nigricans* has also been widely recorded elsewhere on the Atlantic coast of North America, although it is universally considered a rarity in this region. Efforts to relocate and photo document this bird were successfully attempted the following day.

Although currently regarded as a subspecies, until at least 1957 *nigricans* was regarded as a full species (see American Ornithologists’ Union. 1957. *Check-List of North American Birds, 5th ed.*). The taxonomy of Brant worldwide continues to be shrouded in controversy, so birders in Massachusetts are encouraged to pay special attention to any Brant exhibiting dusky or blackish underparts, along with carefully documenting the appearance of such birds when they are encountered. 



“BLACK” BRANT IN PLYMOUTH BY WAYNE R. PETERSEN