Red-footed Falcon: How Did It Get Here?

Julian Hough

The occurrence of North America's first Red-footed Falcon on Martha's Vineyard generated great buzz in both the ornithological and nonornithological communities.

The flight of a small, insectivorous falcon from Europe across the Atlantic embodies a Herculean feat of stamina and willpower, and it is intriguing to speculate as to how on earth this superb little hunter made it here in one piece!

Several hypotheses as to how such a bird arrived in the continental United States were floated about, and not surprisingly, there was some question of the bird's origin.

Before we can discuss migration and movements, it seems pertinent to dispel the captive origin theory. Many species, especially passerines, are kept widely in captivity and often escape. It is necessary for committees to consider this factor when adjudicating rare records. Although some falconer's banded birds do escape and cause problems in the field (e.g., Hybrid Gyrfalcon x Peregrine Falcon), there is no reason to suggest that an unbanded Red-footed Falcon, mainly an insectivore and therefore not suitable for falconry, had escaped from captivity.

It seems more productive to focus on the fact that Red-footed Falcons are proven long-distance migrants, capable of sustained flights between their Eurasian breeding grounds and southern Africa. These birds fly 6000 miles each way, and as a result are prone to vagrancy. Four records (all post-1980) from Iceland (April-July) are testament to its vagrancy potential well to the west of its main wintering and breeding areas. In Europe, Red-footed Falcons breed from Belarus east into Asia, with the European breeding population concentrated in Hungary. The whole of the European population departs the breeding grounds for South Africa commencing in August, often peaking in areas of the Middle East later in October (Dick Forsman, *in litt* 1999).

A summary of what we know of Red-footed Falcon migration and molt strategy may be helpful to use in conjunction with our discussion of the Martha's Vineyard individual. In the fall, the main migration route is through eastern Europe down into southern and western parts of South Africa. In the spring, the birds return northward via a more westerly route. This clockwise portion of its migration loop is the main reason that this eastern breeding species is annual in western Europe, birds reaching as far north as the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. This westward dispersal into northwest Europe peaks in late May. Of the males that occur in the United Kingdom, a significant proportion are second calendar-year (first-summer) birds with mostly retained juvenile flight feathers, barred underwing coverts, and barred outer tail feathers. In early fall, juveniles and adults have a complete annual molt, but flight and tail feathers are molted on the wintering grounds. Any adults that start primary molt

on the breeding grounds generally suspend molt during migration and complete it later on arrival in southern Africa.

It is important to use correct age terminology when trying to piece together information on vagrants. The Martha's Vineyard individual was in its second calendar year (or first-summer) plumage — a phase rather common among vagrants occurring in spring/early summer in northern Europe. It would seem that the time of year and age class of the Martha's Vineyard bird mirrors that. Public discussions reflected some confusion over the ageing terminology, with occasional references made to the Massachusetts bird as a second-summer individual. This is inaccurate since that would imply that the bird was two years old (i.e., third calendar-year). Without wanting to get bogged down with molt terminology, simply put, a juvenile bird is in its first calendar-year up until December 31. On January 1 it then becomes a second calendar-year bird. Our subject bird, a second calendar-year bird, was still in its first year of life. We can then assume that this individual had spent the previous winter as usual in Southern Africa and somehow during its northward return to Europe had become displaced.

It is unknown at what time or location the bird deviated from its usual northward migration from Africa. Did it get caught up in one of the fast-moving tropical depressions off the Atlantic coast of Africa and make landfall in the Caribbean or Lesser Antilles? Once in the western hemisphere, it might then have resumed its northward flight, only 180 degrees off course, arriving finally in New England. There are others who hypothesize that the bird arrived in the far northern United States in late spring, arriving there via northern Europe or Iceland, and that it then headed south to land at Martha's Vineyard in August. We must remember that genetically this bird is programmed to head north in spring, so personally, I feel that a southbound trajectory at this time of year would be somewhat contradictory.

In the United Kingdom, while the influx of Red-footed Falcons generally occurs in late May, birds continue to be seen throughout the summer months. These dates may reflect birds that arrived in spring and have gone undetected, rather than newly arrived migrants. This bird, on its long northward flight, may have made it as far north as southern Europe or the United Kingdom, where transatlantic shipping traffic may have offered a "lift" to such a tired migrant. Personally, I believe that this is the most plausible explanation, and that the bird may have been present in the country since early June, closer to the peak of dispersal into Europe.

In species such as Red-footed Falcons, a gregarious and communal bird, large-scale influxes often occur. For example, in 1992, 5000+ were recorded in Italy, 2000 in the Netherlands, and over 100 in Britain. It is during such years of large-scale invasions that vagrants might be expected to reach their most remote outposts. However, unlike the invasion in 1992, in 2004 there have been only fifteen to twenty individuals noted in the United Kingdom, and almost fifty percent of those were second calendar-year males.

No one will ever really know how this bird reached Martha's Vineyard. It is occurrences like this, rare and unusual, that force our inquisitive minds to sit up and marvel at what birds can accomplish. To see such rarities is fantastic. To find one is an exhilarating triumph of hard work and luck.

Well done, Vern!

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