

One Birder's Falcon

Matt Pelikan

The Red-footed Falcon discovered August 8, 2004, at Katama Air Park, in Edgartown, became, like no bird since the Newburyport Ross's Gull almost three decades ago, a public bird. Thousands of people (and, by some estimates, as many as several hundred *at once*) watched the elegant falcon perch on signs, hover, slice the sea breeze, and snag insects and the occasional vole at this grass-runway airport. The errant raptor's image cropped up in countless media outlets, and word of its presence on the Vineyard reached distant corners of the globe. But birding is strange: however famous a bird may be, the act of seeing it retains a highly personal quality. Each of those thousands who saw this most public bird carries a unique set of reflections and memories. Here are some of mine.

I. Screwing Up

Birders may fantasize about instant recognition when an important vagrant comes their way, and sometimes, I suppose, it happens that way. More often, though, identification of a rare bird, especially an unthinkable rare bird, is a drawn-out process, as pieces of information gradually assemble themselves into revelation. So it was with the falcon.

On my forty-sixth birthday, I received a call from Vineyard birding icon Vern Laux, whose voice held an edge that makes a Vineyard birder cringe: "Oh, jeez, what has he found *now*?" In this case, Vern reported that a Mississippi Kite was eating grasshoppers at Katama. I phoned the news on to a couple of other birders, but it was not until the next afternoon that I had a chance to drive to Katama, where I located the putative kite without much difficulty. I watched it through binoculars at moderate range, in indifferent light, as it perched, preened, hawked, and hovered. Then I drove home. I remember a vague sense of the bird not looking quite as I recalled Mississippi Kites looking — but this is a species I've seen just a handful of times, and anyway, when Vern reports a bird, one goes to see it, not confirm it. I doubt I even had a field guide in the car, and the scope stayed snoozing on the back seat. Satisfied that my memories of past kites had sprouted weeds, I never contemplated another explanation for any mild dissonance I felt.

This was not my finest hour. (Happily, I wasn't the only experienced Vineyard birder thus snookered.) But it isn't surprising that even Vern, a better birder than I am, indeed a better birder than pretty much everybody, also booted this one at first. Mississippi Kites occur pretty regularly in Massachusetts, mainly on Cape Cod, and although the only one found on the Vineyard in recent decades was a dead one, it's a species that surely hits the Vineyard from time to time. A slate-gray raptor eating insects at Katama? That's a Mississippi Kite. Hard to think of another candidate. There *are* no other candidates. Under those circumstances, to make reality conform to expectation is only to acknowledge the limitations of memory and sense, and the

variability of birds. Perhaps the light is bad, the plumage aberrant, the feathers worn or stained. If the bird is behaving strangely, maybe that's because it's in an unfamiliar habitat, or ill-equipped for that muscular sea breeze.

Not one to be embarrassed about anything in any case, Vern wasn't and shouldn't have been at all bashful about the episode. Birders may crave rarities, but conscientious observers don't pounce immediately on the most exciting alternative: a bird is a common one until proved otherwise. True, cautious observers may miss the occasional chance to enhance our understanding of bird distribution. But if a species occurs somewhere, sooner or later that will become apparent. An incorrect claim of a rarity, on the other hand, actively distorts our understanding of where birds travel: once a bum report gains currency, it has dented the fender of the ornithological record. The point is, Vern found the bird and made a reasonable assumption. But his lingering unease about the bird ("It gave me a headache," he says) prompted continued scrutiny, and on Tuesday, August 10, this led to another telephone call with that familiar edge in Vern's voice.

"But what if the bird had left in the meantime?" you may ask. Ah, but it didn't, did it?

II. Mind Expansion

A few weeks or so postfalcon, I headed home along the Beach Road, paralleling the coastal lagoon that stretches between Edgartown and Oak Bluffs. I had scoped Sarson's Island, a sandbar in the lagoon, earlier that morning, and a second breakfast beckoned. So I just crunched over clamshells into a pullout for a quick scan out the car window. Amid the usual suspects, a bird, partially obscured, might have been a Lesser Yellowlegs — uncommon but expected on the Vineyard — but somehow didn't look quite right. I shut the car off, hopped out, dragged the scope from its bed, and potted a juvenile Stilt Sandpiper I might easily have blown off. No great rarity, to be sure, but a nice Vineyard bird: only the second time I'd seen this species in my eight fall migrations here, and the first time in this plumage. The falcon episode, if nothing else, provided a salutary reminder to pay attention.

But the falcon episode had implications that went far beyond a refresher course in birding basics. Once one learns of the normal migratory pathway of Red-footed Falcon and its pattern of vagrancy in the Old World, its appearance on the Vineyard doesn't seem so far-fetched. (See the article by Julian Hough in this issue.) Of course, since you can't really prove a negative, the possibility that the bird was an escape will always remain, and indeed rumors of bereft falconers began to circulate within days of the correct identification of the bird. But even the most cynical observers agree that a natural arrival here of a Red-footed Falcon is at least possible. Whatever its true origin, the Katama falcon altered the perception U.S. birders have of this species.

And beyond that, falconmania sent me and no doubt many others back to the field guides. Few of us peruse range maps in Eurasian bird books looking for potential North American firsts (unless, perhaps, we are traveling to Attu). And if any one had predicted Red-footed Falcon as an East Coast arrival, I'm sure I never heard of it.

But the falcon's appearance sets one to wondering: What other Eurasian birds show similar patterns of seasonal movements and vagrancy? Which engage in different patterns of movements that might plausibly launch them on a New World trajectory? Will you be ready for North America's first Eleonora's Falcon when it misses the Canary Islands?

III. Mixed Flocks

One inevitable side effect of a public bird: large aggregations of birders put the full spectrum of our community on display.

Sometimes, this not a good thing. Within five minutes of my arriving to view the now correctly identified falcon, two New Jersey birders had nearly commenced a fist fight over some past exchange of insults, sputtering refurbished opprobrium and butting each other like billy goats until fellow Vineyard birder Al Sgroi and I realized they weren't clowning, recovered from our astonishment, and pried them apart.

Generally, though, the falcon brought out the best in birders. It was as close to 100 percent reliable as a bird can be. Most visitors had the falcon in their glasses within minutes, even seconds, of their arrival on site. Moreover, this bird wasn't just rare, it was spectacular, interrupting its aerobatic hunting flights only to tee up obligingly on a runway sign. Satisfied birders were cheerful and cooperative, scrupulously observing the airport manager's request to keep out of the air park boundaries, bantering happily, and loading up on sandwiches at Whosie's, the quirky little restaurant at the air park. Has there ever been a rarity more conducive to projecting a favorable image of the birding community?

Moreover, as a public bird, the falcon came to the awareness of provinces quite remote from the world of birding. Once, as I scoped with a squad of birders by the roadside, a small car with four occupants pulled onto the shoulder beside us. An excited young woman, perhaps of college age, popped like a champagne cork from the passenger door and asked, almost gasping, "Who is it? Who is it?" There was a moment of blank expressions as the birders' minds clanked into gear: Martha's Vineyard ... airport ... celebrities ... *human* celebrities.

I explained the situation. The young woman, frowning as she grappled with the odd notion of ogling a bird, stepped back into the car. I could see her speak briefly; then all four of the car's occupants erupted in laughter. But they didn't drive off. And after a moment the woman got out again. "Um," she began. "Could we look at it?"

But the bird was more than just a stand-in for Carly Simon in the eyes of most nonbirders. They came on purpose to see the bird, standing patiently in line to squint through a birder's telescope. Off-balance in the face of an unknown birder's etiquette, most timidly waited to be invited rather than asking for a peek. For many, it was a family outing: many children will recall 2004 as the summer they saw that really rare bird on the Vineyard. Some asked questions; others just gazed, with the same awed expression that I imagine genuine Carly or Clinton sightings inspire. The Vineyard means two things to most off-islanders, celebrities and natural beauty, and in the Red-footed Falcon, these two attractions merged.

IV. Cult of Celebrity

Once Cornelia Dean's article on the Red-footed Falcon hit the front page of the *New York Times*, the die was cast: this was a Big Story. Although my own contribution to discovering and identifying the bird had merely been to bungle it, as a Vineyard naturalist I nevertheless found myself in considerable demand. I wrote newspaper articles on the bird — one on its discovery, one on its departure — and I provided background for many more articles. I was interviewed for a Boston public radio program (one happy result was that an old friend in Sudbury, long out of touch, was prompted to “Google” and e-mail me after hearing whatever it was that I said). I even donned a shirt with buttons on it to be interviewed (live!) on a local cable TV program, in a mercifully obscure morning time-slot.

On the one hand, it's gratifying when society abruptly decides that skill or knowledge you possess is of general interest, and as a passionate advocate of conservation, I welcomed a chance to help people understand, appreciate, and take local pride in an unusual natural event. And the falcon provided, in spades, what educators call a “teachable moment.” Many nonbirders, for example, had no idea that while a particular vagrant like the falcon may be astoundingly rare, vagrancy in general is a common phenomenon, a factor in the natural history of nearly every species that migrates. But if all the falcon-related pontificating I did may have been useful, it also felt sterile, almost irrelevant. Facts are just facts. “Do you really want to learn about birds?” I wanted to say to the interviewers. “Lose the microphone and let's go birding.”

The bird also became inescapable in everyday conversation around the Vineyard. “Have you been to see the falcon yet?” friends invariably asked on greeting me. “Yes, several times,” I replied, by which I'm afraid I meant, “A potential first North American record, eight miles from my house? What do you think, you ninny?” Acquaintances apologized as if they had insulted me by not going to see the bird. I grew tired of explaining why “Oh, the poor thing! It must be lonely!” was not really the right response, even if it was a well-intentioned one. Things began to seem out of balance, as people somehow managed to assign the bird both more importance in my life than it had, and less. An episode that began in unity devolved, paradoxically, into yet another source of birder's alienation. Public bird or no, the nonbirders still didn't quite get it.

And, of course, a Big Bird means requests for information and transportation from visiting birders. The exemplary handling of the falcon by Massbird (the state internet forum) took much of the burden from Vineyarders for providing information on the bird and how to get to it by taxi or bus. Still, I heard from people from as far away as Florida, California, and Colorado. Is the bird still there? How long will it stay? Is there any chance you could meet me at the boat? One tries to be helpful to other birders, and the falcon provided a welcome occasion for me to see old friends and meet e-mail acquaintances of long standing. But as time passed, interruptions while working (and, a few times, while sleeping) began to grow burdensome.

All in all, then, my life with the falcon was ambivalent from the start, pride and enthusiasm tempered by exasperation and stress. Strongly positive at first, the mixture shifted relentlessly toward the negative as time passed, in a progression probably familiar to any birder who has lived near a lingering mega-rarity. I'd have been crushed if the bird had left the day after its identification. But when it did spiral up and head west, after two weeks of bringing joy and wonder to so many, I was halfway happy it had gone.

V. Good-bye

My final view of the falcon was also my favorite one. Around sunrise two days before the bird disappeared, I drove to Katama to work the shorebird flock that roosts on the Katama Farm hay fields in late summer. The falcon wasn't even much on my mind, but given where the plovers were milling about, it made sense to enter the hay fields through a gate just across a dirt road from the airfield. Inevitably, I scanned the runways and grassland for a glimpse of the celebrity, which I quickly spotted parked on one of his favorite taxiway signs.

From behind me, golden light from the rising sun swept across the Katama plains like a cavalry charge. Dew sparkled; the light intensified every color; through my spotting scope, the falcon looked like a glossy photograph of itself. As I watched, it came to life, rising for one of its patented hunting forays, likely its first real flight of the day. I stepped back from the scope and raised my binoculars, following the falcon as he hovered, sheared, and circled over the grassland. Drawing close to where I was standing, it feinted at a startled Savannah Sparrow. Then it swooped past, nearly over my head, so close I could hear the air rush past the bird's famously molting wings.

As it passed over, the falcon spared me the briefest of glances before resuming its search for prey. Captivated by its grace, power, beauty, and rarity, I tracked the bird as intently as if I sought to draw him into my binocs. The bird, thoughtless of his own attributes, intent only on his next meal, considered me for an eye-blink and dismissed me as irrelevant. It was simply a bird, living as a bird. Yet my own impulse, the urge to observe, felt equally like a law of nature. Birds act like birds. And birders, acting like birders, watch them. That's what I learned from the falcon.

Good luck, bird. May grasshoppers always be plentiful. 🐞

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