

PRAIRIE FALCON: FIRST DOCUMENTED RECORD IN MISSISSIPPI

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Although the Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) has previously been listed from three adjacent states it had not been reported from Mississippi as of 1991. On 7 December 1991, Gene C. Knight led a small group on a field trip from Oxford to several access points along the south shore of Enid Lake. At about 12:30 p.m., a large pale-brown falcon flew along the shoreline at Cossar State Park. The bird gave a clear view of a black axillary area of the underwing, enabling Knight immediately to identify the bird as a Prairie Falcon. Shannon Knight and Robert Briscoe were also able to see that diagnostic feature. Briscoe indicated that he had seen a large falcon on 1 December at the shoreline of the Persimmon Hill campground area, which is located immediately westward across an arm of the lake from the state park, but he had supposed the bird to be a Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*).

Because this sighting seemed unprecedented, Davis was reached by telephone in hopes that he might also see and photograph the bird. Indeed, the bird was located at 3:15 p.m. roosting in a dead tree near the water on the peninsula ca. 200 m north of the restaurant in George Payne Cossar State Park. Photographs obtained that day were too poor to confirm identification; slides taken on 1 January 1992 were more definitive and have been deposited in the bird collections of the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science in Jackson, and of the Department of Biological Sciences at Mississippi State University.

The bird's pale-brown back color resembled only slightly that of a first winter Peregrine; the face pattern was incorrect for that species. The bird showed a light line over the eye and a thin (not broad) dark mark below the eye (the so-called "mustache" mark) with a quite noticeable finger of light color between the dark line and the brown auricular area. These are characters of the Prairie Falcon, but not the Peregrine.

Besides the dates listed above, the falcon was seen by numerous additional observers on several other dates, including 15 and 30 December 1991, 3 and 5 January, and 7-9 February 1992. The last known date of occurrence was about 29 February. In early January 1992, it became apparent that the Prairie Falcon could usually be found between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. resting for long periods in one of several sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) trees at the site described above. A staff member at the State Park reported to Davis on 30 January that he had been seeing the falcon there frequently at 4:30 p.m. It was sighted that day from 3:40 to 4:10 p.m.

We know of no observations of this bird hunting, however it was once seen to fly westward beyond Enid Dam. Flocks of blackbirds tend to feed in the open park-like area west of the dam. The diet of this species generally includes small mammals and birds. In winter this may include open country flocking birds such as larks, longspurs, blackbirds, and doves (Palmer 1976). Prairie Falcons sometimes prey heavily on Rock Doves (*Columba livia*), and even birds as large as grouse and pheasants. The mostly wooded habitat where this individual was wintering appears poorly suited for supplying appropriate small mammals, so it seems likely that birds were its predominant food. An abundance of gulls on the lake might have contributed to its sustenance.

During the previous winter season (8 December 1990 and later dates) at the Persimmon Hill area Robert and Janet Briscoe had seen a falcon that they took to be a young Peregrine, although Prairie Falcon was considered. In retrospect, the 1991-92 falcon might well have been the same bird returning for a second winter. Peregrine Falcons pass through the area on migration, but have not been noted in winter. A Prairie Falcon was found for six consecutive winters near Guntersville, Alabama (Muth 1990), supporting this hypothesis.

Other regional observations of the Prairie Falcon have been made in Arkansas and Tennessee. Four records, ranging between November and February, were cited by James and Neal (1986) from Arkansas, and three more were added in the winters of 1988-89 and 1989-90 (Muth 1989, 1990). Five fall Tennessee dates (Robinson 1990) are notably earlier, from early September through October.

Two unpublished sight records of the Prairie Falcon from Mississippi have come to our attention, both from the Gulf coast (Judy Toups, pers. comm.). One falcon was watched for several minutes by Toups and Dalton King on 4 November 1983 at Lakeshore, Hancock Co., as it soared high overhead with Black (*Coragyps atratus*) and Turkey (*Cathartes aura*) vultures. The second was seen briefly on 4 November 1991 when it flew past at a fairly low level while Toups was leading an Elderhostel group on a field trip at Gulf Islands National Seashore, Jackson Co. The only reliable observer to share this viewing was Bettye James of Birmingham, Alabama. In each of these cases the falcon shape, large size, and dark axillar/underwing area supported an identification as *F. mexicanus* rather than *F. peregrinus*. Further casual appearances of Prairie Falcons in Mississippi are to be expected.

Addendum: A staff member at the State Park reported seeing a large falcon in the area again on 13 November 1992. Confirmation of the presence of what is presumed to be the same Prairie Falcon was obtained by Gene Knight on 6 December 1992. Paul Lehman (of California) and Thomas Heatley (of Michigan) both observed the bird in the last few days of December 1992 perching on a utility pole near Interstate 55, ca 0.8 mi. west of Enid Dam. This suggests that the falcon's hunting habitat may indeed have been more open as suggested above.

Literature Cited

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