

## PREDATION OF A PEREGRINE ON A RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD THAT WAS MOBBING IT

Charley Delmas

5513 Dead River Rd.  
Gautier, Mississippi 39553

On 13 September 1995, Lucy Jacobson, Charlie Brenke, and I were on the east end of Horn Island, Jackson Co., Mississippi, checking on shorebird activity on a sandbar that was about ½ mile long and 300 yards wide with the Gulf of Mexico on one side and the Mississippi Sound on the other. Several nearby fresh and brackish water ponds on Horn Island also offered feeding sites for many sandpipers and wading birds as well as an open area roosting site for flocks of gulls and terns. In contrast to past visits to the area, we saw little activity other than a Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*), a few Sanderlings (*Calidris alpina*), and Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*). Then we saw the probable reason for the scarcity of birds: a Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) patrolling the sandbar.

We moved west on the island in hopes of finding more birds, then Charlie Brenke noticed the Peregrine flying high in the very blue sky -- perhaps 1500 to 2000 feet up. When we focused on it we were able to see a smaller bird harassing the falcon. Over and over the tiny silhouette flew at the falcon which would duck and twist away but did not change its slow steady course. Then, this mysterious little bird dove toward the falcon's head. This time the Peregrine turned quickly and caught its small, feisty shadow in its bill, then smoothly passed it to its talons. The Peregrine then flew with its prey toward the east tip of the island, landing out of sight behind some sea oats about 1/4 mile away.

We decided to approach cautiously and see if we could identify the Peregrine's victim. As soon as the falcon saw us, however, it grabbed its prey and flew over open water to another section of the island. We continued toward the site where the Peregrine had been in hopes of finding some feathers that might identify its prey. Next to the log on which the Peregrine had been perched was the fresh head of a female Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

We eventually moved to 3 or 4 different spots on Horn Island that day and ended up seeing at least 6 Peregrines and possibly as many as 8, though two might have been birds seen earlier.

Why was the Red-winged Blackbird mobbing the Peregrine? Perhaps it was the only thing it could do if she was separated from a flock and caught in the wide open sky. There was little else the Red-wing could do. If she tried to flee, the much faster Peregrine would quickly overtake her. So she took the offensive, keeping very close above the Peregrine. Keeping pace with the Peregrine, she flew, like a child reaching the limits on a swing, making half-moon arcs at the larger bird, lunging down and coasting up, almost hovering at the top, only to repeat over and over again. In the end, however, the Peregrine had its meal.