

Prairie Falcon, *Falco mexicanus*

by M. Alan Jenkins

The Prairie Falcon is a large falcon, mostly brown and creamy-white. Although capable of taking larger species it preys primarily on ground squirrel-sized mammals and meadowlark-sized birds, along with an occasional lizard or insect. Prairies nest almost exclusively on cliffs, where they use a natural ledge or pothole. This species is only mildly migratory, and is restricted to western North America, primarily the U.S. Nesting populations can be locally dense where the favored ground squirrel prey is abundant.

Both sexes are similar except for size; females average about a third larger. The plumage is dark brown on top; below on the breast it is buffy with dark brown streaks (juveniles), to creamy white with dark brown spots (adults). All individuals have narrow "cheek" stripes and dark patches beneath their wings in the "arm pit," the patches being visible from beneath when the bird is flying. Adults have yellow skin in unfeathered places such as the cere, and legs; juveniles have gray-blue skin in these areas. This species measures 39-50 cm in length, 89-109 cm in wingspan, and weighs from 760-975 grams. Males average smaller in all measurements (64% of female body weight).

Prairie Falcons nest in open shrub-steppe deserts, plains, and montane (including alpine) habitats, especially those areas having cliffs in prey-rich habitats. They do not nest in urban areas, areas lacking cliffs, or heavily forested regions. They are cold and heat tolerant, and do not need to breed near water, nor do they usually nest on the seacoast or islands.

Prairies are very rarely tree nesters. The stick nests of other large raptors and ravens are sometimes used; usually, however, eggs are laid on bare soil in a bowl-like 'scrape' situated on a cliff ledge, or more often in a cavity or crevice. Cliffs utilized vary from quite low to extremely high. Some traditional nest sites are used over many years.

The nesting season, depending on the area, is March-July. Only one brood of young is produced each year. Clutches consist of 3-5 eggs, with an average of 4.5. They are handsome white or creamy, with variable dark brown markings ranging from spots to large splotches and bands. Incubation requires 31 days, mostly by the female. Young are provisioned primarily by the male early on, and by both parents later in the 38-40 days before fledging; a post-fledging dependency period of about 25 days follows.

The Prairie Falcon nests from south-central British Columbia, southern Alberta and southern most Saskatchewan south to western North and South Dakota, western Nebraska, Colorado, Cimarron County of Oklahoma, western third of Texas and the Sierras Madre Oriental and Occidental of Mexico, west to Baja California Norte, California, Oregon and Washington; it is mostly absent from the Pacific coastal slopes. The species winters farther east out onto the Great Plains and farther south into Mexico from the breeding range. It is estimated there are 4,000-6,000 breeding pairs, excluding non-breeders and juveniles, in an area of 4-4.5 million sq. km. There has been no apparent change in distribution or abundance in recent history except locally, where prey habitat has been destroyed or disturbance is a factor. In general Prairie Falcon populations appear stable.



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