

THE FIRST RECORD OF THE OCCURRENCE OF PRAIRIE FALCON  
IN THE STATE OF ALABAMA

Howard M. Einspahr and Edward J. Meehan

On February 6, 1975, at approximately 3:15 p.m., we were returning from a handball game, walking east on Seventh Avenue South, Birmingham. As we approached the crest of a knoll between 13th and 14th Streets, we observed a small brown raptor flying northwest and steadily gaining altitude. When first noticed, the bird was about 15 feet above an asphalt-surfaced parking area that lay some 100 yards east of and 20 feet below us. The bird leveled off and turned west after crossing Seventh Avenue, flying by us at an altitude of less than 60 feet ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 telephone poles). At closest approach, it passed north of us just across Seventh Avenue.

The bird's flight was not particularly swift and repeated a cycle of between three and five wing beats followed by a short glide. The flight pattern was agreed to be peculiar, though not unambiguously characteristic as to genus, and was thought to be partly the result of the bird's effort to gain altitude. The bird appeared to gain speed going west as it approached the building complex between 12th and 13th Streets that houses the gym of the University of Alabama in Birmingham (U.A.B.). We lost sight of the bird in a flock of about 20 Rock Dove (Columbia livia) that rose from a roof of the complex as the bird approached.

At 3 p.m. February 6, 1975, the National Weather Service recorded skies at the Birmingham airport overcast at 1700 feet, visibility of 6 miles, wind out of the west ( $280^\circ$ ) at 11 knots and a temperature of  $41^\circ\text{F}$ . These data are consistent with our recollection of atmospheric conditions at the time the bird was sighted. The bird was observed with the sun at our backs until it passed us, whereupon its image was reduced to a silhouette. Observations were made without the aid of binoculars or any other telescopic device. No camera was available to record the sighting.

The size of the bird was between one and one-and-a-half times that of a Rock Dove, an interval which brackets our slightly differing estimates. The bird showed a longish tail, held closed in flight, and wings with prominent wrists and narrow, pointed tips. The appearance of wing "windows" is accounted for by the observation of the absence of a primary flight feather (possibly the fourth or fifth) from each wing. A hooked raptor-bill was noted. The overall color was light brown. No prominent light or dark markings were noted on the head or elsewhere except for a clearly visible black axillar under the left wing. The axillary area under the right wing was withheld from view for the duration of the sighting. On the basis of these observations, we conclude that the bird we observed was a Prairie Falcon (Falco mexicanus).

The only other species mentioned in the standard field guides as having black axillars is the Black-bellied Plover (Squatarola squatarola), a species which can be ruled out as inconsistent with other observed characteristics of the bird. It is perhaps not commonly recognized that some individuals of Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis) may exhibit dark axillary regions. However, in the admittedly few observations of such birds by one of us (HME), it has been noted that dark axillary regions are accompanied by prominent, dark belly bands and appear, in fact, to be extensions thereof rather than separated in coloration from the surrounding plumage. In any case, the bird in question lacked the characteristic Buteo form and no hint of a belly band was noted.

Both of us had seen Prairie Falcon individuals prior to this sighting. EJM observed one in Wyoming in the summer of 1974. HME had seen the species several times, most recently in January, 1975, at Cheyenne Bottoms National Wildlife Refuge, Kansas.

News of the sighting was spread by word of mouth. Although several parties, including one of us (HME), intensively searched for the bird during the weekend, it was not seen again.

The area in which the bird was sighted is the campus of U.A.B. and is part of an urban renewal scheme. It may be characterized as containing blocks of classroom buildings interspersed with sparsely wooded vacant lots that have been cleared of shrubbery and are mowed regularly in the summer. It is bordered by small businesses and light industry to the north and west, a residential area to the south and the massive U.A.B. Medical Center complex to the east. This area, some 12-15 square blocks, supports sizable populations of Rock Dove and Mourning Dove (Zenaidara macroura). Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus) are often seen as well as may breed on the gravel roofs of some of the buildings. Birds of prey of several species have been seen there from time to time.

While this area is not unfrequented by raptors, it is decidedly unusual that a Prairie Falcon should be sighted there. This sighting is the first record for the state of Alabama and, to the best of our knowledge, the first record of the species for the southeastern region of the United States. There are very few records east of the Mississippi River. A. C. Bent (Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey, Dover Publications, New York (1961)) acknowledges several records for Minnesota, one record for Wisconsin, and three for Illinois, all in early winter and all prior to 1931. The fifth edition of The A.O.U. Checklist of North American Birds (1957) lists the species as casual in Minnesota, Illinois and Indiana.

The weather in the weeks prior to this sighting, according to National Weather Service records, included the passage of two cold fronts through Birmingham. A strong front arrived on the afternoon of January 19 with winds out of the northwest gusting to 28 mph and considerable precipitation, including a very light snow fall with no accumulation. The second and somewhat weaker front arrived February 1 from a westerly direction with winds gusting to 25 mph.

The unusual nature of this sighting now seasons with anxiety any periods we spend out-of-doors without binoculars (though they really weren't necessary in this case) or camera. We feel that the details of this observation are sufficient grounds for addition of Prairie Falcon to the Alabama state list with hypothetical status. We agree, however, that it should remain on the hypothetical list either until additional sightings are made in the state or until photographic evidence of its occurrence in this region is available. It should be noted that the Prairie Falcon is considered an endangered species and taking of specimens is prohibited by Federal law.

1500 33rd Street So. Apt. 1  
Birmingham 35205

#### BANDING ON THE BALDWIN COUNTY COAST

Thomas A. Imhof and James V. Peavy, Jr.

On September 19 and 20, 1958, and at least twice each winter, spring and fall since August, 1971, the writers have banded at Fort Morgan. This produced a total of 2269 new banded birds of 96 species on 64 days or 35 birds per day. At Fort Morgan, the birds are netted on the north (bay) side just under one mile from the west end of the 21-mile-long peninsula. This site, known as the "Wall," is near the east boundary of Fort Morgan State Park, where a 5-foot-high wall bisects the peninsula. Birds cross this wall in huge numbers during migration, but it is somewhat exposed to the west, and catches are sometimes poor in the afternoon or when the wind is westerly. But, the funneling effect of the terrain and the use of alternate nearby sites make up for any disadvantages.