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Documentation of Sighting

Date of Report
12/1/91

Peregrine Falcons in Iowa, Fall, 1991

Sighting Date: 9/14/91
Species: Peregrine Falcon
Scientific Name: *Falco peregrinus*
Number Seen: 2
Place: Runnells Wildlife Area
City:
County: Warren
State: IA
Nation: USA
Habitat: Mud Flats
Record Number: 1786

Optics & viewing conditions: Leica 10X40 binocs; bright overcast light, mid morning.

Other observers: Jim Sinclair, Jim Fuller, Pete Peterson, others.

Other identification possibilities: Birds were too big and grey for kestrels; too big and too much face pattern for merlins; no black axillaries and too dark for prairie falcons; too small, slim, and dark for gyrfalcons.

Notes and sketch (unimproved copy attached) made on the spot. Account written out next day.

At the Runnells field trip of the IOU fall meeting in Indianola, there were thousands of shorebirds. When all the shorebirds took to the air, we looked around for falcons and saw these two plain-dark-backed, fast birds, with pointed wings, slice into the flocks. Peregrines! They skimmed just above the water, dropping down behind a dike and then popping up a little further on to surprise anything still on the surface. They flew so close to us that we could see every detail of their facial patterns. (They had two dark vertical "sideburns" on each cheek, the front one wider than the back one, and the back one almost like part of the dark crown, but a little separate from it.)

The two falcons seemed to be working together. They cut a sandpiper out of the flock and chased it until the panicked bird dived beak first straight down into a patch of smart-grass. The falcons hovered above the spot for a minute or so, but that sandpiper wasn't coming out in any way. The morning was hot and muggy, and I guess hunting was tiring work, because the larger falcon landed on the dike not far from us and stood with her wings out from the body and her beak open. (40 yards off, by my guess.) I say she, because the other bird was smaller and therefore presumably a male, and this a female. The male didn't seem to tire. I understand that females, being larger, develop flight much more slowly than males — perhaps this was more challenging exercise to her than to him. We watched the standing female through our scopes. Her bill was pale blue at the base, with a blue cere. Also she had a blue sort-of-an-eyering. Her tail was fairly long, fairly thick at base, and indistinctly barred. Her back was dark grey, as were the upper surfaces of her wings. Her breast was white or cream with heavy stripes. She had green paint on her left wing, which I believe made her Left Green, one of the birds from the Des Moines project. (The male had no trace of paint.)

When the female recovered, the two took out after another flock of sandpipers. The flock dispersed until the falcons were after just one bird — with flashing black and white wings — the single willet on the refuge, the bird some of us had come to see. You have to imagine 15 Iowa birders in a string along a dike, watching this trio tear by. Somebody said, "Go, Willet," and it became a chant. Jim Sinclair told me later he always roots for the raptor, because they're so rare, but heck, there were two peregrines and only one willet. The willet was the rarer bird here. It did escape. I think it suddenly realized it was the main target, and it went into overdrive, or maybe it was warp drive. That baby moved. It was interesting to me that the peregrines could not overtake it in level flight. Typical predator-prey relationship, when you think about it, but I'd always thought peregrines were the fastest birds. I guess that's when they're diving. The peregrines may have had to go back to Des Moines for some Coturnix quail at the hacking station that night — they sure didn't eat willet.

standing w/ wings held out
from body



Two progenies, left green
a smaller male.

blue eyes