

## DOCUMENTATION FOR UNNAMED FALCON SIGHTING

Species: Unnamed Falcon

How many? One

Location: Jefferson County Park, near Fairfield, Jefferson County.

Habitat: Bird was perched in top of a dead deciduous tree at border between woods and grassy hills.

Date: 9/30/88 about 10:00 A.M., a bright overcast morning. I watched the falcon for about 10 minutes.

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No one was with me, and I know of no one else who saw the bird.

Description (copied from notes taken while bird was in view):

Looks like a giant kestrel, from facial pattern, the shape of the bird, and the shape of the head, but **much** larger. (My very first thought, based on size and position, was of a small buteo. But I immediately saw the shape and facial pattern and realized it had to be a falcon.) The size of a crow or a **little** smaller. Not so big as a red-tailed hawk. Black or dark brownish grey on back, feathers edged with cream color, giving a scaly appearance.

**Indistinct** dark bars on top of tail.

Striking facial pattern, very much like a kestrel's, but on a larger scale: smudgy dark wide horizontal stripe through the eye; small touch of white horizontal line above the eye. Conspicuous white cheek patch, reminiscent of a chickadee's (though not so sharply defined as a chickadee's). Dark vertical bar in front and less distinct dark vertical smudgy bar in back of white cheek patch. (I could not see how far down toward throat these bars came, because of the the bird's shoulder in the way.) The crown of the head a dirty white, extending forward down to the forehead. Bill all dark, no yellow apparent.

Bird regurgitated something while it was perched. I failed to locate the material after the bird was gone.

When it flew, I looked for black under the wings, because I suspected it might (however improbably) be a prairie falcon, but I did not see the black. However, the bird was in view for only a moment in flight before it disappeared over the trees. I did note the characteristic wing shape of the falcon. The sky was bright although overcast, and I was not satisfied that I would have seen the black under wing in that amount of time with that lighting even if it had been a prairie falcon.

Species I considered:

**kestrel:** It was much too large, and there was no trace of rusty on wings or back.

**merlin:** I would have liked to have made it a merlin, because I have never identified one. But I thought the bird must be too large even for a female merlin. (It was a whole different class of size from a kestrel.) The white cheek patch was fairly dramatic. Also, the bands on the tail were indistinct. I suppose, however the bird had to be this species or the next.

**prairie falcon:** The size, the fairly distinct white cheek, and the scaly appearance of the back made me consider this species. But — 1) I didn't see the black under wings, 2) I'm in eastern Iowa, 3) the dirty white crown is not much more help here than for the other falcons.

**peregrine falcon:** This would have been nice too, but the facial pattern was all wrong. White on cheek was up high near the eye, there was the short white supercilium, and the crown was very light.

Reservations: I have nothing but reservations about this bird.

Viewing conditions: I was looking up at about a 60° angle. The bird's back was 80% toward me, so I saw the back and upper tail. Bird turned its head to watch me, so I saw the side of the head. I had a clear view, but such an angle that I could not see the bottom part of the face. The distance was such that an 8-year-old boy, perched where the bird was, could have hit me with a rock, had he been so maliciously inclined. My binoculars are Zeiss 10X25.

Previous experience: I am of course very familiar with kestrels. I have seen prairie falcons about half a dozen times, but never one perched close like that. I have never identified a merlin or a peregrine.

I looked in Peterson's while the bird was in view. I consulted National Geographic field guide after I got back to my car. I consulted several other books when I got home. The Audubon Society's Master Guide to Birding shows a picture of a prairie falcon on page 264 that looks a lot like the bird I saw, including a fairly light crown and forehead. I wrote my notes while the bird was in view. This report is being written on 11/26/88, or two months after the event.

If anyone can tell me what the bird was, I would be very grateful.