

Prairie Falcon -- Documentation

In the afternoon of January 4, as I was returning from a birding excursion to Newton Hills State Park in South Dakota (some 5 miles west of the Iowa border), and had re-entered Iowa in Sioux County just east of the Big Sioux River in the Fairview area, I scared up a large falcon. I was driving along a gravel road, heading south, so the light was not good. I watched the falcon fly some three-quarters of a mile towards the south and alight on a telephone pole. I cautiously drew closer in my car, occasionally stopping to observe the bird through my zoom balance. But the light continued to be poor (from the southwest), so that I could not be certain whether the bird was a Prairie or a Peregrine (or even a Gyr?) Falcon. It clearly was a falcon, judging by its shape and pointed wings. As I approached the bird it took off once again, this time taking a course into a south-easterly direction. I followed it in my binoculars for what I judged to be a mile, until I lost sight of it. I continued south for a mile, then headed east on a gravel road graced with tall telephone poles. About half a mile down this road I found the falcon once again.

It was perched on top of a tall telephone pole. Perhaps because it was a tall pole, the bird allowed me to approach slowly until I was less than 30 yards from the pole. This time the light was excellent, since now I had the sun behind me. I at once ruled out a Peregrine: the bird did not have strong head markings (no dark crown, and no heavy "sideburns") and was altogether too light to be a female Peregrine. The bird was quite light below with spots. The facial mustache was thin. The bird was facing me at an angle, so that I could see its underparts and part of its upperparts. If I had had a camera I could have taken a photograph which would show the bird exactly as depicted on page 162 of the Peterson's Field Guide.

I continued to approach slowly, until the bird decided to take off. As it opened its wings I could clearly see the distinctive black in the wingpits. Though there was no doubt in my mind in any case, these dark axillaries, so clearly visible, clinched the identification.

This is the third time I ^{have} seen a Prairie Falcon in Sioux County. Interestingly, this bird occurred in an area within half a mile of where I saw the last one three years ago (documented and reported at that time - January, 1986).

I have some familiarity with the larger falcons: I have observed Prairie Falcons in Iowa, Nevada, California, and Alberta; Peregrine Falcons in Ontario, New York, California, B.C., and Alberta; and the Gyrfalcon in Manitoba.

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