

Prairie Falcon
21 Sep 1985
Polk Co., IA
*S. Dinsmore, *E. Munson
IBL 56:44

Record Number: 85-17
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATIONS

Steve Dinsmore
Eric Munson

LETTER

Bruce Peterjohn to Tom Kent, 23 Dec 1985, p 3

REFERENCE

Records Committee: IBL 56:44

VOTE: 5-III, 1-IV, 1-V

V, The date and location are typical for Peregrine Falcon, atypical for Prairie Falcon. Cramp's description of P. f. tundrius (the arctic race of the Peregrine Falcon that migrates through our area) in juvenal plumage is as follows: "Juvenile tundrius paler above, some almost sandy-buff with wide pale feather edges, head conspicuously pale, underparts lighter and more narrowly streaked."

IV, Very possibly correct ID but I can't rule out the possibility of a pale, imm. Peregrine without the sighting of dark axillaries.

III, Caution: There are falconers in the Ames-Des Moines area.

III, Good descriptions even without axillaries seen. This species seems to be trying to become regular! (Seen DeSoto CBC & Tristate CBC also)

III, Too bad the bird flew away directly, but pale color and head pattern sounds like Prairie.

REVOTE: 6-IV, 1-VI

VI, Most likely an immature arctic peregrine.

IV, This bird could possibly have been a light colored tundrius Peregrine; without noting the underwing pattern I can't say if this is positively a Prairie.

IV, While the bird may well have been a Prairie, I do not feel that at this time of the year an imm. Peregrine could be ruled out from the description given without having seen the dark axillars of a Prairie.

IV, Peterjohn's points are well taken. I agree with his analysis.

IV, Interesting to learn about young arctic Peregrines.

Tom Kent
23 Dec. 1985
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Arctic Loon--unacceptable. The observer failed to mention any of the distinctive plumage characteristics. His description did not eliminate a small Common Loon.

Ferruginous Hawk--unacceptable, undoubtedly a Red-tailed Hawk. Both observers described the tail as bicolored with a white base and broad reddish terminal band. This tail pattern indicated the bird was an adult hawk. Both observers mentioned the underparts were entirely white, which eliminates an adult Ferruginous Hawk which would have noticeably reddish legs.

Prairie Falcon--unacceptable. Their descriptions of the head pattern are ambiguous and contradictory while the other important field marks (black axillars, wing shape differences, ...) were not noted. Hence, I don't feel confident that Peregrine Falcon was satisfactorily eliminated. The observers may not be aware that young tundra Peregrines have light brown crowns which contrast with the darker "moustache mark". (Dinsmore described the crown as lighter than the back which sounds suspiciously like a young Peregrine; Prairies should not have a contrasting crown.) To answer your question, it is very possible for experienced observers to correctly identify Prairie Falcons without viewing the axillars. Unfortunately, my impression is that most Iowa observers lack considerable experience with large falcons so that observing black axillars may have to be required in most cases (except possible for wintering birds which are much more likely to be Prairies).

Trumpeter/Tundra Swan (4/8/85--Clay Co.)--the photographed bird is definitely a young Mute Swan, based on plumage characteristics and bill color!!!

Concerning your fall report, I noticed 2 errors. Sage Thrasher was left out of the "Species Data" section and the peak dates for Solitary Vireo should be September, not August. I was also dismayed by the poor quality of documentation produced by Steve Dinsmore. They were generally very sloppy with incomplete details and mostly unacceptable. Most of his sightings would not have been included at all if they were not observed (and properly documented) by others. I would suggest that somebody in your Records Committee provide him with examples of good documentations and explain to him the importance of providing thorough details for all noteworthy observations. While you are familiar with Steve's abilities, I know his poor descriptions will not impress any knowledgeable observer who does not know him.

This letter has gotten too long. I'm about to enter the computer era which should be a great convenience for all of my writing. Hope I've satisfactorily answered your questions. Let me know if I can provide any other assistance. Best wishes for this holiday season.

Sincerely,


Bruce Peterjohn

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

What species? Prairie Falcon How many? 1Location? 3 m. north and $\frac{1}{2}$ m. west of Alleman, Polk CountyType of habitat? open country near soybean and hay fields.When? date(s): 21 Sept. 1985 time: _____ to _____Who? your name and address: Steve Dinumore 4024 Arkansas Dr. Ames IA 50010others with you: Erik Munson, Ames

others before or after you: _____

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

We had an excellent opportunity to observe the bird at close range as it perched on a fence post along the road.

At this close distance, we were able to see that the bird was quite large, maybe 16-18" long, and extremely light colored. Also, because it was very windy, the bird had its tail flared out to balance itself. The tail was heavily marked with many narrow ~~black~~ black-and-white bands. These bands were much narrower than those of a Merlin. The back and wings were a sandy brown color. The head was lighter colored than the back, with some brown on the crown. The throat and cheek were light colored with a dark mark extending from the base of the bill through the cheek. The underparts were light colored with heavy, brown spotting throughout.

In flight, the bird flew straight away from of us, low to the ground, until it disappeared over a hill. The long pointed wings, long tail, and rapid wingbeats supported our identification as a Prairie Falcon. Unfortunately, the bird flew too low the ground to allow us to see the black axillaries.

Similar species and how eliminated: The birds large size, overall light color, lack of rufous color on tail or back, and lack of a dark head eliminate Am. Kestrel and Merlin. The light gray back color rather than dark back color, the dark whiter on the face, lack of a dark "hood" on head and light brown streaking on crown eliminate Peregrine Falcon. The size, lighter head and back, dark whiter, and lighter underparts eliminate Gyrfalcon.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? YES.If yes, explain: Several people wondered if the bird could have been an immature Peregrine Falcon.Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

Light was excellent with sun overhead on a partly cloudy day. Estimated viewing distance as close as 15-20' with the bird seen flying at greater distances. I used Nikon 8x25 Binoculars

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have seen prairie falcons in western United States. I have seen several Peregrines and Merlins in Iowa. I have never seen a Gyrfalcon.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Robbins, et al. Field Guide to Birds of North America, WBS Field Guide to Birds of North AmericaHow long before field notes made? 2 hours this form completed? 4 days

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

What species? Prairie falcon How many? 1Location? 4 mi. north of Alkernan, IAType of habitat? croplandWhen? date(s): 21 Sep time: 1:30 to 1:32Who? your name and address: Erik Munson, 3223 West St, Ames, IA 50010others with you: Steve Dinsmore

others before or after you: _____

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

When perched on a roadside fence post, the bird showed obvious falcon characteristics - pointed wings, hooked bill (color unnoticed), upright posture. We had just observed three kestrels - this one was nearer the size of a crow. Overall, the bird was pale, showing not rusty, but a pale gray-brown ^{sandy} back. A complex head pattern was noticed - however no deep black shades were noted - rather mid- to dark-gray.

Tail was striped ~~with~~ withwise with black on gray or brown on tan, with a white terminal band.

Breast unnoted, probably paler, streaked somewhat.



head pattern
(not very exact)

Similar species and how eliminated:

merlin by size, habitat, paleness, tail; kestrel by size, back color, tail, etc.
imm. peregrine by lack of black head, paleness,

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? nope.

If yes, explain: _____

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

good 80 yds., est. 8x32 binocs

Previous experience with species and similar ones: noneReferences and persons consulted before writing description: Steve DinsmoreHow long before field notes made? 5 hrs. this form completed? 5 hrs.

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240