



WILDLIFE NOTES

Prairie falcon

By: Bryan Kimsey

Prairie falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) aren't called "ghosts of the desert" for nothing. Though relatively common in New Mexico, they're hardly ever seen by most people. Maybe it's their drab brown color that blends so well into the landscape; maybe it's their habit of flying fast and low to the ground in search of prey. If you're near canyon cliffs or mesas that run out into desert grasslands chances are you're near a prairie falcon.

If you are observant enough to find a prairie falcon, how do you identify it? These birds are about the size of crows, but with narrow pointed wings. Underneath they're pale tan with brown splotches. Their dark "armpit" distinguishes them from all other raptors and is readily visible in flight. On top, they are "mesa brown." They have a thin mustache stripe and a white stripe just over the eye, running all the way around the head.

Like other falcons, these birds nest on cliffs. The female finds a ledge or pothole with sand or gravel. Here she lays three to five eggs on the bare surface. By June the young have hatched.

The male does most of the hunting, especially while the chicks

are young. The female spends her time watching over the nest, brooding the chicks and feeding them. Within six weeks the young "fledge" and are ready to make their first flight. It takes a few days to get the hang of flying, and a few more weeks before they're skillful enough to start hunting on their own.

A prairie falcon's diet includes birds up to the size of pigeons, small rodents such as ground squirrels and mice, and even large lizards. Unlike their close relative, the peregrine falcon (*F. peregrinus*), which exclusively takes aerial prey, prairie falcons have no qualms about catching their prey on the ground. A prairie falcon's feet are considerably shorter and stouter than a peregrine's.

The prairie falcon is capable, though, of blistering dives after prey. It's hard to say which species is faster. When diving, the peregrine usually folds its wings and drops, whereas prairie falcons frequently pump their wings while dropping, adding the force of flight to gravity's pull. If large prey, such as a rooster pheasant or a mallard drake, isn't killed on impact, peregrines are loath to tackle it on the ground. But prairie falcons don't hesitate to tackle downed

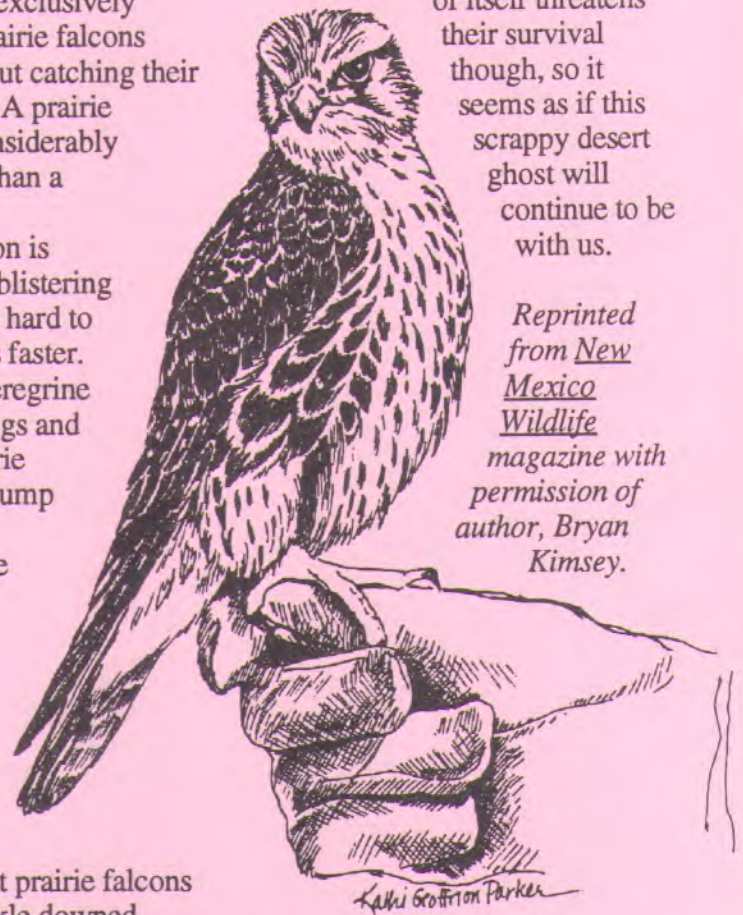
prey. It's hard not to respect their tough-guy attitude.

Prairie falcons are common in the West. Their mixed diet largely saved them from the ravages of DDT, which the peregrine suffered. Humans haven't encroached too deeply, yet, on the cliffs and mesas the prairie falcons need. Where they have, the falcons are generally tolerant as long as they're not directly harassed.

The biggest threats to prairie falcons are shootings, collisions with power lines, and loss of habitat. None of these factors in and

of itself threatens their survival though, so it seems as if this scrappy desert ghost will continue to be with us.

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