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Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard

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***Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts, pages 110-129: Vultures, Hawks & Eagles**

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Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Identification: Usually seen in flight, this species soars for long periods on wings that are slightly uptilted and that are two-toned, with black in front and gray behind, and with a blackish body. The head is reddish, and appears small relative to the size of the wings and body.

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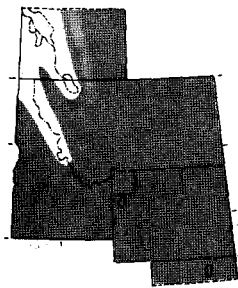
Status: A summer resident nearly throughout the area, but less common northwardly, and rare in Canada. Generally rare in the montane parks, and commoner on the arid plains. Nesting occurs in the vicinity of Dinosaur National Monument.

Habitats and Ecology: A scavenger species that consumes only dead remains of large animals such as livestock, which it finds visually. Generally found below 8000 feet, and lower farther north.

Seasonality: Montana records are from March 4 to November 29, and Wyoming records are from April 13 to October 19. There are few nesting records, but Utah and Colorado egg records are from May 20 to June 3, and downy young have been seen as late as July 3.

Comments: Nesting in the Rocky Mountains is usually done on cliff ledges under overhangs, or in rock crevices, often in river valleys. The sites are typically well concealed and shaded, and following a fairly long incubation period of about 40 days the young have a long 70- to 80-day fledging period, which limits nesting to more temperate latitudes.

Suggested Reading: Coles, 1938, 1944; Brown and Amadon, 1968.



Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Identification: This hawk is unique in its fish-catching adaptations, and the species is limited to areas where fish are found. Its white underside color, with black "wrist-marks" on the wings and a blackish upper surface are distinctive, as are the long wings, which are usually held at a bent angle rather than straight out.

Status: A common summer resident in montane areas near lakes or streams, probably breeding in all the montane parks. Elsewhere mostly a migrant, except around some plains reservoirs, such as Fort Peck, which supports several breeding pairs.

Habitats and Ecology: Commonly seen along clear rivers and lakes, these birds sometimes nest on rock pinnacles (as in Yellowstone Canyon), but more often nest in tall trees near water, in large nests resembling eagle nests.

Seasonality: Montana and Wyoming records are from early April to late October, peaking in late April and September. Nesting in Montana is from late April to late July with eggs usually hatching by mid-June and fledging by mid-August.

Comments: In the late 1970s about 20 osprey pairs nested in Grand Teton N.P., about a third of which hatched young, and brood size averaged 1.4 young. Various lakes supported about twice as many nests as were located along rivers and streams, and the average heights of the nests were 17.2 meters above the ground.

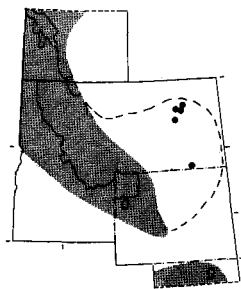
Suggested Reading: Alt, 1980; Swenson, 1975; Green, 1976; Richardson, 1980.

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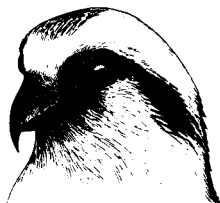
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Osprey



Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Identification: Adult birds, with their white heads and tails, are unmistakable, but immatures are mostly brown and best told from golden eagles by their relatively heavy bills and underwing linings that are paler than their flight feathers.

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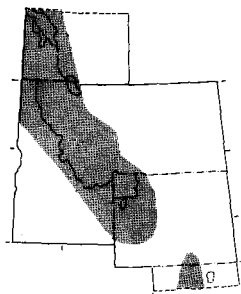
Status: A resident throughout the forested montane areas, breeding in nearly all the montane parks. Otherwise a migrant, and in late fall (especially early November) up to several hundred birds gather in Glacier Park to forage on salmon, producing a unique spectacle.

Habitats and Ecology: This species feeds almost exclusively on nongame fish, such as squawfish, during the breeding season, and also on dying salmon following their spawning period.

Seasonality: Present in much of the area year around, but with major seasonal changes in abundance, with migration peaks in March and November. Egg dates in Wyoming are few, but hatching typically occurs about May 1, with fledging about July 10.

Comments: Grand Teton and Yellowstone parks supported about 20 active nests in the late 1970s, of which about three-fourths hatched young, and an average of one young per nest fledged. These nests were located at an average height of 17.4 meters above the ground.

Suggested Reading: Sherrod et al., 1976; McClelland et al., 1982; Dunstan et al., 1975.



Bald Eagle

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

Identification: This is the only North American hawk with long, narrow wings and a white rump patch; males are mostly silvery gray, while females and immatures are dark brown except for the rump patch. The birds often course low about the ground and marshy areas searching for rodents.

Status: Occurs throughout the region, nesting locally, especially in non-forested habitats such as grasslands, croplands, and meadows.

Habitats and Ecology: Grassy areas, especially those near water, are favored by these birds, which nest on the ground rather than in trees, as with most hawks.

Seasonality: Montana and Wyoming records generally extend from late March to late November, with peaks in April and November, although overwintering often occurs in mild winters. Wyoming egg records are from May 2 to June 6, with nestlings observed as late as August 8.

Comments: This species is called the "hen harrier" in Britain, and has previously been known generally as the "marsh hawk."

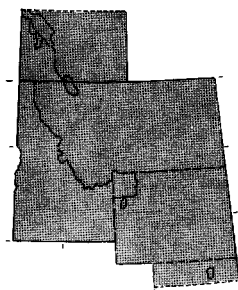
Suggested Reading: Snow, 1973b; Hamerstrom, 1969; Hammond & Henry, 1949; Watson, 1977.

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Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)

Identification: This is a pigeon-sized hawk with short, rounded wings, a long and square-tipped tail, and usually found in woodland habitats. It flies swiftly, with little gliding, typically catching birds in flight.

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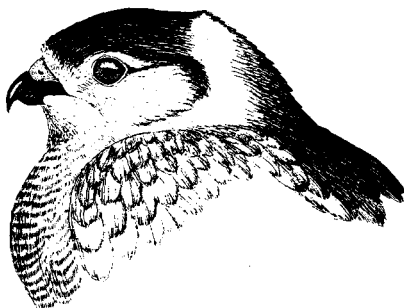
Status: A common to rare summer resident or year-round resident of montane woodlands of the region; breeding in most and perhaps all the montane parks. Rarely found far from woodland, even on migration.

Habitats and Ecology: Fairly dense forests, either mixed or coniferous, are the preferred habitats of this species, which is swift and elusive, and usually nests in dense groves of trees. Aspens, riparian woodlands, and coniferous forests are all used for breeding.

Seasonality: Although locally resident in Wyoming, most birds appear by April, and are gone by November. Wyoming egg records are for the first half of June; egg records from Montana are from June 6 to July 3, and nestlings have been seen as late as August 25.

Comments: Perhaps the commonest of the "accipiter" hawks of the area; this species is a major predator on small birds.

Suggested Reading: Wattle, 1973; Reynolds, 1978; Platt, 1976.



Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter velox*)

Identification: This accipiter hawk is larger than the sharp-shinned, and has a more rounded tail. Both species are swift woodland hawks, and are rarely seen for extended periods in open country.

Status: Found in essentially the same wooded montane and foothills habitats as the previous species, and perhaps slightly less common in most areas.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with mature forests, especially deciduous or mixed, and less often in pure coniferous stands. Aspen groves are favored breeding locations; nonbreeders use riparian woodlands, scrub oaks, and mountain meadows.

Seasonality: Occasionally resident in southern areas, but in Wyoming and Montana most birds are present between April 1 and September, with migrants commonly seen in April and May. There are few regional nesting records, but in Colorado egg records extend from May 18 to July 1, and nestlings have been seen as early as July 1. Nestlings in northern Utah have been found by June 19, and fledged young by July 30.

Comments: Like the sharp-shinned hawk, this is an effective bird predator, probably taking slightly larger prey on average than does that species.

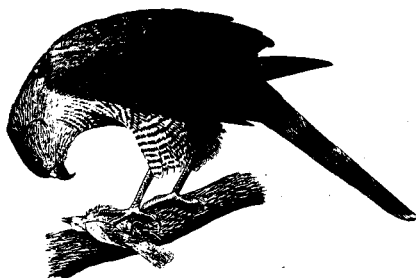
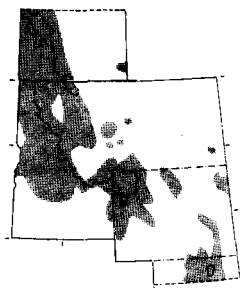
Suggested Reading: Craighead & Craighead, 1956; Henny & White, 1972; Meng, 1951, 1952.

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Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Identification: This is the largest accipiter, and the palest underneath, at least in adults. Immatures are more brownish and streaked, but are still large and have conspicuous white eyebrows as in adults.

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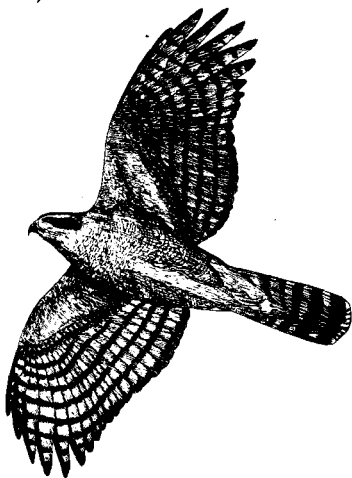
Status: An uncommon to rare permanent resident in woodland and montane forests of the region.

Habitats and Ecology: This species is found in many habitats from aspen groves to timberline, but favors dense conifers or aspens near water for breeding, and ranges into low woodlands, riparian woods, and sage areas at other times.

Seasonality: Although largely resident, there is some seasonal migration, with migrants evident during March and November. Wyoming egg records are from May 10 to June 17, with nestlings reported from June 17 onwards. Egg records in Colorado are from May 30 to July 27, and nestlings have been seen from mid-July onward.

Comments: This magnificent hawk is the largest of the North American accipiters, and sometimes takes prey as large as grouse or pheasants. It also regularly hunts mammals such as hares and ground squirrels in this general region.

Suggested Reading: Schnell, 1958; Brown & Amadon, 1968.



Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)

Identification: This rare hawk is best identified by its strongly banded tail and pale "windows" at the base of the primaries when in flight. Adults are also strongly rufous on the breast and underparts. It is similar to the equally rare broad-winged hawk, but that species is less slim, and has shorter wings, as well as whitish rather than dark brown wing linings.

Status: An accidental vagrant in our region; reported once at Glacier National Park and reported as a rare migrant in the Fort Collins latilong of Colorado.

Habitats and Ecology: This is a hawk of the moist eastern deciduous woodlands, and is unlikely to be encountered in most of the region.

Seasonality: There are two (April and September) records for Montana; Colorado records extend from March through July.

Comments: Although a common species in eastern North America, red-tailed hawks occupy at least part of this species' niche in western forest habitats.

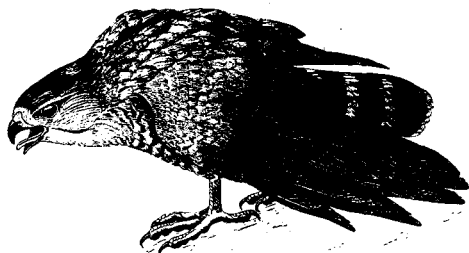
Suggested Reading: Wiley, 1975; Portnoy & Dodge, 1979; Stewart, 1949.

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Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)

Identification: Another rare eastern hawk which, like the red-shouldered hawk, is unlikely to be seen in the region. Like that species, it also has a strongly banded tail and pale areas at the base of the primaries, but the rest of the underwing is also whitish except for a posterior black border.

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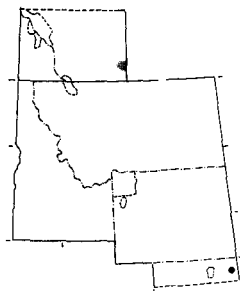
Status: A rare vagrant or migrant in most of the region, but breeding in the Cypress Hills of Alberta, as well as north-central Alberta; and has bred once in the Fort Collins latilong of Colorado. A rare migrant east of the Front Range in Colorado.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with deciduous woodlands, including riparian woods and (in Alberta) aspen grovelands.

Seasonality: Migration in Alberta occurs during April and September; in Colorado the birds have been seen from April 15 to December 1.

Comments: In Alberta these birds are found in deciduous or mixed woods, where they hunt within the confines of the forest rather than along forest edges or open fields, as do red-tailed hawks. They migrate south early, sometimes in rather large flocks.

Suggested Reading: Matray, 1974; Brown & Amadon, 1968.



Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*)

Identification: A typical prairie and grassland hawk, easily identified by the combination of whitish wing linings and a dark grayish primary and secondary color. In most adult color phases the breast color is darker than the abdomen as well, but in dark-phase birds this may not be evident.

Status: A common to rare summer resident over most of the region; least common in the heavily forested montane parks, especially to the north.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with open grasslands, sagebrush, agricultural lands, and rarely with riparian areas, typically nesting in isolated trees, but sometimes in bushes, on man-made structures, or on cliffs.

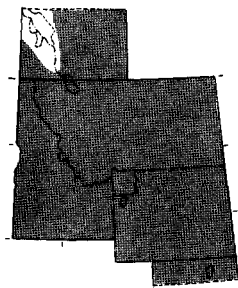
Seasonality: Reported in Montana from mid-March to early November, with migration peaks in late April and early September. Montana and Wyoming egg records are from May 3 to mid-July, with nestlings observed as late as September 12.

Comments: Like the red-tail, this is a highly beneficial hawk that primarily consumes rodents while on the breeding grounds (insects in wintering areas).

Suggested Reading: Bowles & Decker, 1934; Smith & Murphy, 1973; Dunkle, 1977.

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Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Identification: This is the commonest buteo of the region, especially in wooded areas. The rusty tail of adults (visible from above only) is diagnostic, but immatures lack this feature. Both age groups have blackish leading edges to their wings from the base to the "wrist"; the underwing surface is otherwise quite whitish, except in rare dark-phase individuals, which are extremely hard to identify.

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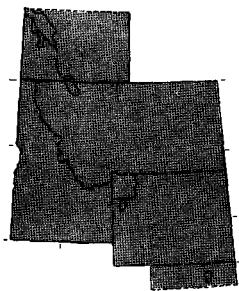
Status: A permanent resident nearly throughout the region, although somewhat migratory to the north, and becoming rare in open plains, where replaced by the Swainson's hawk.

Habitats and Ecology: A tree-nesting buteo that also extends to open woodlands and even treeless areas, where nesting may occur on cliffs. However, trees, especially large cottonwoods and pines, are favored nest sites.

Seasonality: Present year around in most areas, but with migration evident in April and again in September and October, especially in some areas. Montana and Wyoming egg records are from April 20 to late June; in northern Utah hatched young have been seen as early as April 14; in Jasper Park newly hatched young have been seen in late May.

Comments: A highly beneficial and adaptable hawk, which concentrates on rodents and rabbits as its prey, but also utilizes a variety of other vertebrate foods.

Suggested Reading: Fitch et al., 1946; Austin, 1964.



Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*)

Identification: A large open-country hawk with mostly white underparts except for brownish thighs with silvery white bases to the primaries, often forming a "window" effect from above. Dark-phase birds may have entirely blackish undersides and wing linings, but their primaries still show white bases.

Status: A relatively uncommon to rare summer or year-round resident in the region; primarily in open-country habitats, and rare in the montane parks, with only Yellowstone reporting breeding.

Habitats and Ecology: Found during the breeding season in grasslands, sagebrush, and sometimes also mountain meadows, and nesting in pygmy conifers, cliff ledges, rock outcrops, and sometimes on man-made structures.

Seasonality: Usually present in Montana and Wyoming from March to late September, but often overwintering, especially from southern Wyoming south. Nesting in the two states is from late April to mid-July, with nestlings seen as early as June 23.

Comments: A large and spectacular prairie hawk, now relatively rare because of shooting, poisoning, and illegal killing, in spite of the species' great value as a rodent hunter.

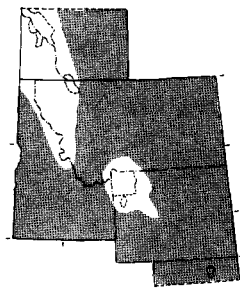
Suggested Reading: Smith & Murphy, 1978; Snow, 1974a; Watson, 1969; Angell, 1969.

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Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*)

Identification: Similar to the ferruginous hawk, but usually much darker underneath, especially across the abdomen, and with more conspicuous dark "wrist" patches underneath. From above, the primaries show the same kind of pale "window" as the ferruginous hawk, but the tail is usually black-tipped or (in immatures) somewhat banded.

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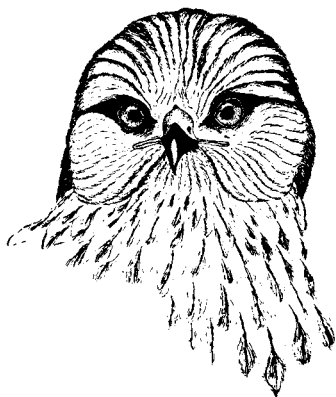
Status: A regular winter visitor throughout the region, especially in open habitats.

Habitats and Ecology: Usually found in grasslands, sagebrush, or sometimes over marshes or mountain meadows.

Seasonality: Present in Montana and Wyoming from late August or September until April or May, depending on weather conditions, but usually migrating north by March. In Alberta they may not always overwinter, but usually appear by March and leave before the end of April, appearing again in October and November. The nearest breeding areas are in the tundra areas of northeastern Manitoba.

Comments: This is one of the common winter hawks of the region, replacing the Swainson's to a large degree.

Suggested Reading: Springer, 1975; Schnell, 1968; Brown & Amadon, 1968.



Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Identification: Unlike the bald eagle, this species never has an entirely white tail or a white head. Further, it typically has white or pale color near the base of the dark tail, and pale to whitish "windows" at the base of the flight feathers when viewed from below, although in adults the undersurface is rather uniformly dark. Unlike the bald eagle, it is often found far from water.

Status: A permanent resident throughout the region, but most common in montane or rimrock country that is relatively open.

Habitats and Ecology: This is a mountain- and plains-adapted species, that often occurs in grasslands, semidesert areas, pinyon-juniper woodlands, the ponderosa pine zone of coniferous forests, and sometimes forages above mountain meadows or alpine tundra. It nests over a broad altitudinal range, usually on cliffs or in trees, rarely on the ground.

Seasonality: A permanent resident in the southern parts of the region, but somewhat migratory in northern areas, especially in the case of young birds. In Montana egg records are from mid-April to June; in Wyoming egg records are as early as March 15, and in Rocky Mountain N.P. nestlings have been seen as early as April 20. Nestlings have been reported to late July in Montana and Alberta.

Comments: One of the grandest of American birds, this species has been greatly harassed by humans, especially ranchers, who have wrongly condemned it of sheep-killing. It is now largely confined to remote or protected nesting areas.

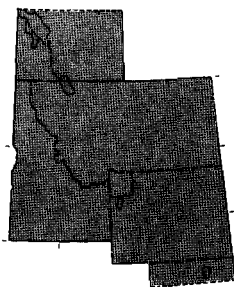
Suggested Reading: Snow, 1973a; McGahan, 1968; Brown & Amadon, 1968

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American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

Identification: This tiny falcon is commonly observed on telephone wires or on the wing, where it hovers frequently. The rusty brownish upperparts, the conspicuous "mustache," and (in males) the bright rusty tail color are all useful fieldmarks. Females are slightly less colorful, and have a brownish barred tail.

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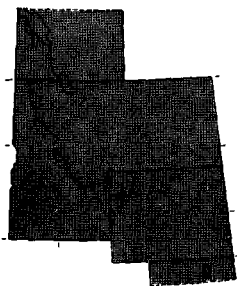
Status: A relatively common summer or permanent resident over nearly all the area, becoming more seasonal in occurrence farther north, and probably breeding in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: This is an open-country falcon, occurring in agricultural areas, grasslands, sagebrush, desert scrub, and nesting in tree cavities, rock or building crevices or cavities, and rarely in earthen holes. It avoids forests, but sometimes forages as high as mountain meadows.

Seasonality: In Alberta these birds are present primarily between April and late October, while in Montana and Wyoming they usually arrive in March and leave in November, with some birds overwintering in mild winters. Wyoming egg records are from May 15 to June 20, and eggs have been found as late as July 3 in Rocky Mountain N.P. In Montana fledged young have been seen in July, but small young have been observed as late as August 18. Alberta and Saskatchewan egg records are from May 22 to June 17.

Comments: This species, previously known as the "sparrow hawk," is the most insectivorous of the falcons, often catching grasshoppers or other large insects.

Suggested Reading: Cade, 1955, 1982; Enderson, 1960; Balgooyen, 1976; Willoughby & Cade, 1964.



Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

Identification: This medium-sized falcon is much more elusive than the American kestrel, and is somewhat larger, with streaked to spotted underparts, and much less conspicuous "mustache" markings. It is brown to bluish gray above, with a somewhat barred tail.

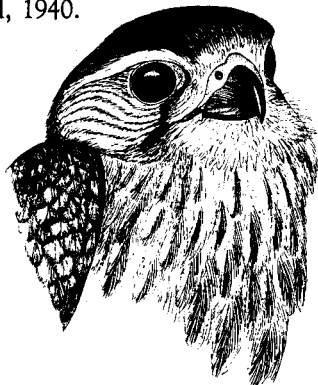
Status: A relatively rare migrant or summer resident in the region, mainly in montane wooded areas, and breeding locally.

Habitats and Ecology: This is a forest and woodland-adapted falcon, usually breeding in tree clumps of open woodlands, often in bottomlands or valleys. During the non-breeding season it also appears over grasslands, agricultural lands, desert scrub, and marshes or shorelines.

Seasonality: Migration records in Wyoming are from March 13 to May 24, and again from September 2 to November 27, with some overwintering. Breeding records are few, but egg records in Colorado are from May 26 to July 3. Alberta and Saskatchewan egg records are from May 7 to June 6.

Comments: Like most falcons, this species has declined in recent years, and sightings have become ever rarer. It hunts like the other falcons, catching birds in shallow dives, or sometimes from stooping in steep dives. Commonly also known as the "pigeon hawk."

Suggested Reading: Cade, 1982; Craighead & Craighead, 1940.

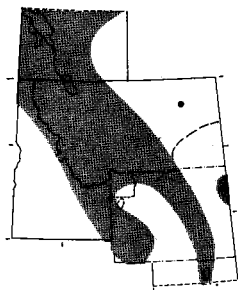


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Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

Identification: This is a large falcon, the same size as the more common prairie falcon, but darker throughout, with more conspicuous "moustache" markings, and lacking the dark underwing linings of that species.

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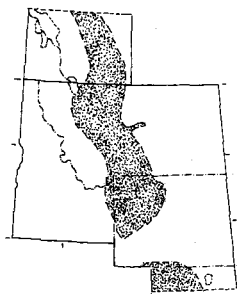
Status: Now largely extirpated as a breeding species from the region; once a nester throughout the montane areas and nesting in at least Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone parks. Efforts are currently underway to re-establish the species in some of these areas by releasing hand-reared birds. There are no recent Alberta nesting records.

Habitats and Ecology: This species is largely a cliff-nesting species, typically in woodland habitats. Non-breeders occur over a wide habitat range, from mountain meadows to grasslands, marshes, and riparian habitats.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 2 to November 30; wintering birds sometimes occur as far north as southern Alberta. There are Montana records of nestlings from July 10-17. Alberta and Saskatchewan egg records are from May 6 to June 13.

Comments: Widespread use of pesticides in the post-war era nearly destroyed this species in North America, and it is still gone from most of its historic breeding range. Between 1976 and 1982 a total of 330 peregrines were released in the Rocky Mountains. Golden eagles and great horned owls have been major predators of the released birds.

Suggested Reading: Snow, 1972; Cade, 1960, 1982; Porter et al., 1973; Hickey, 1969.



Gyrffalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)

Identification: This large, arctic-breeding falcon is usually seen in its gray phase, which resembles a very large prairie falcon, but lacks dark underwing linings, and is more grayish throughout. A rarer white phase has also been reported from the region.

Status: A rare winter migrant or accidental vagrant, more likely to occur in the northern portions of the region, but sometimes wandering south to Colorado.

Habitats and Ecology: An arctic tundra species, in our region the birds are likely to be found in open habitats such as grasslands and plains, where large prey such as rabbits or waterfowl may be found.

Seasonality: All the regional records are for the winter, from December to early March.

Comments: Probably most regional records are of first-year birds that have not yet established breeding territories, after which they are more likely to remain in northern areas throughout the year.

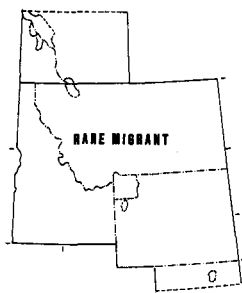
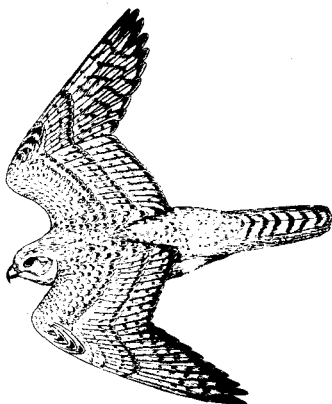
Suggested Reading: Cade, 1960, 1972; Langvatn & Moksnes, 1979.

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Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*)

Identification: This is the most common of the large falcons of the region, and is usually seen in flight, when its distinctive blackish underwing linings are conspicuous. The underparts are spotted with brown, the upper surface is more uniformly brown, and the facial "mustache" markings are only moderately developed.

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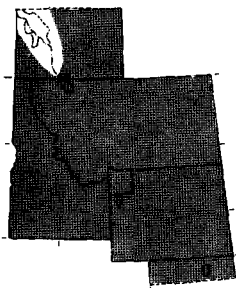
Status: A widespread summer resident or year-round resident throughout the region, mainly in mountain or rimrock areas offering open country for hunting.

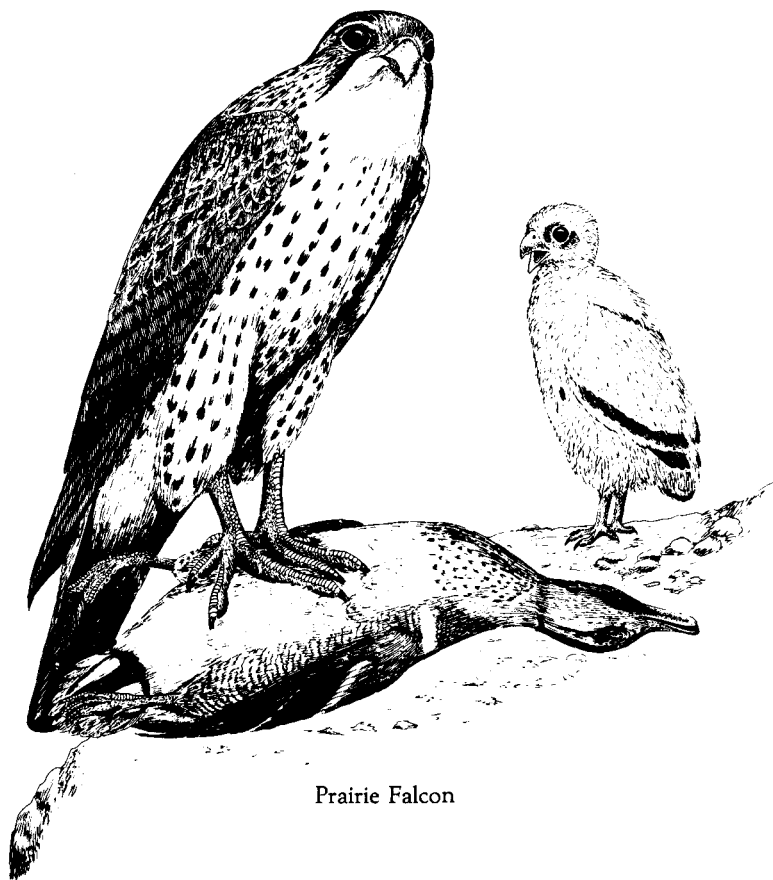
Habitats and Ecology: Breeding birds are largely associated with plains, sagebrush, or desert scrub habitats with steep cliffs nearby for nesting; sometimes tundra areas also support breeders, and foraging may be done on mountain meadows or similar alpine habitats.

Seasonality: In Wyoming the birds are essentially present year around, but some migration occurs in March and November, as they move to more favored wintering areas such as deep canyons. Montana egg records are from mid-April to late June, and Wyoming records are from May 1 to June 8. In Rocky Mountain N.P. nestlings have been observed in late June. Alberta and Saskatchewan egg records are from April 22 to June 14.

Comments: Unlike the peregrine, this species has not suffered great losses of breeding range, although its numbers have sharply declined. It feeds to a considerable degree on rodents and rabbits in the Rocky Mountain region, and thus perhaps has not been so seriously exposed to pesticide poisoning.

Suggested Reading: Enderson, 1964; Snow, 1974b; Cade, 1982; Hickey, 1969.





Prairie Falcon