

Endangered Species and Spaces

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4.7 Prairie Falcon: *Falco mexicanus* (Schlegel)

Order: **Falconiformes**
Family: **Falconidae**

Status

Global Rank: G5
Provincial Rank: S2B, SZN
COSEWIC: Not at risk

Provincial Listing: **Red list**



Distinguishing Features

A crow-sized falcon similar to the peregrine falcon, but decidedly paler and sandy brown above, rather than dark slate or blackish. Head with whitish line over eye and dark brown mustache (malar) streak. Upper parts brown, feathers margined and incompletely barred with tawny; pale band across back of neck. Throat white, rest of underparts streaked with dark brown. Total length 43-51 cm. Female slightly larger than male (Godfrey, 1986).

Distribution

Columbia Basin: Isolated occurrences in the east Kootenay Trench north as far as Golden and west to Bald Mountains of Glacier National Park.

British Columbia: The Prairie Falcon breeds mainly in the Okanagan Valley, Nicola Valley, and Thompson Basin, north through the Pavilion Ranges to the Fraser River. Smaller numbers breed in the Okanagan Range and South Thompson Upland Basin. Smaller numbers also likely breed in the Boundary region near Grand Forks, Midway, and Rock Creek, and in the East Kootenay Trench based on sightings of adults during the nesting season. Small numbers winter in the Okanagan Valley, the Thompson Basin near Kamloops, and Fraser River Basin (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Global: Breeds in w. North America from sc. British Columbia and the s. Prairie Provinces south to Baja, New Mexico, n. Texas, and e. Colorado. Winters in most of the breeding range south to c. Mexico. (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Habitat

Dry open country, usually in the vicinity of cliffs, canyons, coulees, badlands and rock outcrops. Hunts over adjacent grasslands and sometimes mountains and wooded areas (Godfrey, 1986). Most aeries in British Columbia are in rocky, often basaltic or limestone, southward facing

cliffs or in silt cliffs above rivers. In winter in British Columbia, Prairie Falcons occur mainly in rural or suburban areas where they depend on avian prey concentrated around feeders and livestock feedlots (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Threats

Populations in B.C. appear to be either still declining or stabilized at historically low levels. A recent survey of British Columbia found only 5 active aeries, but based on sightings of birds and the provincial range, there may be up to 25 breeding pairs in British Columbia. Pesticides are thought to be the major cause of population declines in the Okanagan Valley and elsewhere. Cliff nesting habitat is secure in British Columbia, but development of hillsides below nesting cliffs may be a local problem since Prairie Falcons are sensitive to disturbance. Conversion of native grasslands to agriculture has caused local declines elsewhere and is likely a factor in British Columbia (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Biology

The Prairie Falcon hunts in open grassland or alpine areas. It preys mainly on ground squirrels but also takes birds, reptiles, and insects. Spring migrants return to British Columbia from mid to late March. In late summer some Prairie Falcons move to alpine areas to prey on migrating songbirds. The autumn movement occurs mainly in September and October. Eggs are laid between mid-March and early May. Clutches usually contain 4-5 eggs and are incubated for about 4.5 weeks. Young fledge after 5-6 weeks, and most broods have fledged by late July. (Cannings et al. In prep.).



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