

A NEW BREEDING RECORD FOR PRAIRIE FALCONS IN THE OKANAGAN VALLEY

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Site 9, Comp. 1, RR 3
Penticton, B.C. V2A 7K8

A Prairie Falcon (Falco mexicanus) nest was found on June 16, 1991 by Rob Cannings and Hannah Nadel on a cliff known as "The Throne" near Osoyoos, B.C. This is the first known breeding record for the species in the Okanagan Valley since 1981, so it may be of interest to review some of the past and recent history of the bird in this part of B.C.

The history of population change, breeding, seasonal distribution, etc., are discussed by Cannings et al. (1987). Information on this bird throughout its range in southern B.C. is provided by Campbell et al. (1990).

Allan Brooks reported a Prairie Falcon aerie at Osoyoos in 1906 and 1907, and two nests on the same cliff in 1922, as well as "many other Prairie Falcon aeries within a radius of five miles". The Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus) was declining in the Okanagan at that time, and several of its former nesting cliffs were being used by Prairie Falcons. Numbers of Prairie Falcons apparently peaked between 1920 and 1930, when there were at least six active aeries in the Okanagan Valley. Populations then declined in the 1940s; the last active aeries were reported at Black Knight Mountain near Kelowna and on Anarchist Mountain near Osoyoos in the 1970s. The latter nest site was used until 1981, and was the last active nest recorded in the Okanagan Valley until 1991.

On March 24, 1991, Doug Brown, with a group from the Oliver-Osoyoos Naturalists' Club, watched two Prairie Falcons in a display flight above the cliffs of "The Throne". On March 31, 1991, Steve and Jean Cannings saw a similar display performed by two large falcons, presumably Prairie, over a cliff near the Anarchist Mtn. lookout on Highway 3 east of Osoyoos. These displays included "mock attacks" by one bird diving on a perched bird. The above two sites are about 13 km apart.

Joan King of Osoyoos reported seeing two falcons, believed to be Prairies, on April 21, 1991. They were flying close to the cliffs at "The Throne". On May 22, 1991, Steve and Jean Cannings, along with Tom and Helen Nelson of Fort Worth, Texas, watched a Prairie Falcon fly to a ledge on "The Throne". No other falcons were seen but a Common Raven, a Red-tailed Hawk, and a Swainson's Hawk were flying in the same area. No interaction with the falcon was observed.

On June 16, 1991, the Prairie Falcon nest was found at "The Throne". Jean and Steve Cannings visited the nest site on June 23, but found it to be empty. It was examined from the base of the cliff with the aid of a 25X telescope. We estimated that the cliff top was about 316 metres above the cliff base, and the nest site about 240 metres above the base. It is at the base of a vertical

crevice and has a rock wedged in it about one metre or less above the floor, forming a roof. Four falcons were seen in the area, probably two adults and two newly-fledged juveniles. Three were seen flying across the cliff face, while the fourth was perched on a snag at the cliff top. We visited the nest site again on June 26, 1991 and again saw four falcons near the top of the cliff.

Brent Diakow of North Saanich, B.C. checked the area of "The Throne" on July 5, 1991, but did not find any falcons there. He did spot a Prairie Falcon near the lookout on Anarchist Mountain. Both of these sites were checked again on July 14, with no luck.

Several non-breeding records of the Prairie Falcon over the past four years include five winter sightings: January 22, 1989, The Commonage, Vernon; January 20, 1990, Black Sage Road, Oliver; December 28, 1990, Vaseux Lake Christmas Bird Count (CBC); December 14, 1991, Vernon CBC; and December 27, 1991, Vaseux Lake CBC. One spring record was on May 21, 1989, at Chopaka, west of Osoyoos, and two summer records were on July 17, 1989, at the Penticton Airport, and on June 28, 1990, at Spotted Lake, Richter Pass.

Some observers feel that the Okanagan population of the Prairie Falcon may be on the increase, but this may not be true in the western U.S. A note published recently (Donahue 1991) reports on the work done by Hawk Watch International, who have been researching western raptors for 13 years. They report a 20% drop in the number of Prairie Falcons over that period. Steve Hoffman, a biologist with this group, is quoted by Donahue as saying that the falcons may be suffering from competition with Common Ravens for nest sites on cliffs. He says that ravens are flourishing because "unlike falcons, they can thrive on the refuse that humans create". We will be watching for the return of our Prairie Falcons next spring with keen interest.

LITERATURE CITED

- Cannings, R.A., R.J. Cannings, and S.G. Cannings. 1987. Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria. 420 pp.
- Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, and M.C.E. McNall. 1990. The Birds of British Columbia: Volume 2, Nonpasserines. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, and Canadian Wildlife Service, Ottawa. 636 pp.
- Donahue, Bill. 1991. Western raptors at risk. Bird Watchers' Digest 14(1):45-47.

ED. NOTE: The pair of Prairie Falcons appear to have nested successfully again in 1992 at "The Throne". We hope they will continue to be successful at this location in future, and that they will reoccupy other former breeding sites in B.C.