

GOLDEN EAGLE ATTACKS PRAIRIE FALCON

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The Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) generally preys on small mammals such as ground squirrels, rabbits, hares, and marmots (Mollhagen 1972, Olendorff 1976, Knight and Erickson 1978, Palmer 1988), and primarily takes species that are most abundant in an individual's hunting range (Palmer 1988). Birds account for a small percentage (usually less than 20%) of the Golden Eagle diet (Mollhagen 1972). Ground-dwelling species such as grouse and pheasants, or unwary juvenile birds, are the type of birds usually taken (Palmer 1988).

Aerial strikes are relatively rare compared to ground strikes, although Golden Eagles have been reported taking or attempting to kill a range of birds in flight, including Sandhill Crane, *Grus canadensis* (Johns 1972); Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos* (Kelleher 1971); White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons* (Kuyt 1974), and shearwaters, *Puffinus* sp. (Wormell 1965). Prey remains at nests include many species of smaller birds, but the method of capture is unknown (Palmer 1988).

Palmer (1988) reports few captures of raptorial birds by Golden Eagles for food in North America, although 6 species of diurnal raptors and 7 species of owls are listed as food in Sweden (Tjernberg 1981). In North America, Golden Eagles have been reported taking a Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) that was harassing the eagle (Broun 1947), and an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) that was lifting off the water after a dive (Lafontaine and Fowler 1976). I have found no accounts of attacks or kills of a member of the Falconidae. In this note, I describe an aerial attack by an adult Golden Eagle on a juvenile Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*).

On September 13, 1989, while studying the autumn migration of birds in the Bugaboo Mountains of southeastern British Columbia, I observed an adult Golden Eagle stooping above me. The eagle stooped for at least 30 vertical metres before attempting to strike a juvenile Prairie Falcon. The eagle narrowly missed, immediately rose 15 metres above the falcon, stooped again, and narrowly missed again. The eagle then disengaged pursuit. The falcon maintained a rapid, level flight throughout the encounter except for "side-slipping" at the moment of the attempted strike, and then continued its level flight until it disappeared from sight.

The intent of the attack appeared to be predatory, rather than merely aggressive. Territoriality was not likely a factor at that time of year (September), as the breeding season was long over, and each species favours different prey (Palmer 1988); nor was the falcon harassing the eagle. Indeed, the eagle appeared to come from a considerable distance to attack the falcon.

Aggressive interactions between these two species should occur

rarely, simply given the two species' scarcity and lack of competition for food resources. Prairie Falcons do, however, frequent alpine habitat in late summer and early autumn, where Golden Eagles also occur (Campbell et al. 1990), thus raising the chance of an encounter.

The attack reported here was likely an opportunistic predatory action on the part of the eagle. The absence of substantial evasive action by the juvenile falcon suggests a lack of experience in dealing with aerial predators such as Golden Eagles. Although attacks on falcons by Golden Eagles are undoubtedly very rare, they may prey on Prairie Falcons more often than is currently recognized.

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