



Conservation Data Centre



Grasslands Conservation Council  
of British Columbia

## Prairie Falcon

### *Falco mexicanus*

#### Physical Description:

Body length: 40-50 cm; wingspan: 1 metre.  
Known as a falcon by its pointed wings, narrow tail and quick wingbeats. Adults are sandy-backed, with light barred chests. Distinguished from the rarer, Peregrine Falcon by paler colouration on face and back.

#### Status:

Global: G5  
Subnational: S2B  
COSEWIC: NAR (1996)  
Provincial: Red List

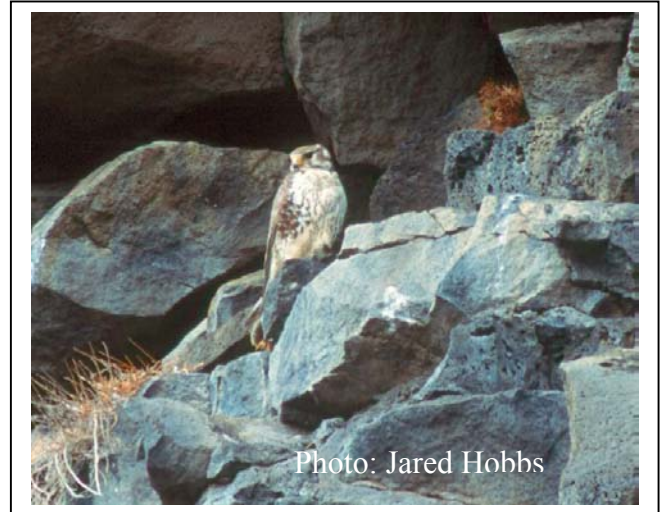


Photo: Jared Hobbs

#### Habitat:

Prairie Falcons nest in rugged terrain on rocky cliffs near open, sagebrush steppes. Their nest site is typically on a cliff ledge, in a recessed site protected by overhanging rock; birds sometimes nest on dirt bank or use abandoned nest of raven or hawk on ledge. Nest sites are usually near water.

#### Range within BC:

In British Columbia, found in the Okanagan, Nicola, South Thompson valleys, north to the Chilcotin-Cariboo Basin region; breeds in the Thompson Okanagan Plateau from Okanagan and Nicola valleys to the Chilcotin-Cariboo Basin. Nests at elevations from 450 to 900 metres.

#### Breeding habits:

Breeding season is from April to August.

Adult birds court for several weeks at the nest site, starting in April.

Three to four eggs are laid in April; eggs are incubated for 29 to 33 days, fledging at around 40 days.

Nesting can be seen at nests in May to early July.

#### Ecological Significance:

### Special Significance

Prairie Falcon populations have declined markedly over the past several decades. Currently, only a few pairs of this rare resident bird breed in the Okanagan Valley. This species is at risk because of its small provincial population size, vulnerability to disturbance and loss of habitat. Intensive agricultural use of organochlorine pesticides (DDT) in the 1950-60s contributed to the decline of birds of prey all over North America and may have affected Prairie Falcons in the Okanagan. The continued survival of this endangered raptor requires protection of nesting sites and conservation of remaining low elevation, shrub-grasslands near cliffs and water. Further studies are required to determine the Prairie Falcon's distribution and population status, nesting sites and breeding behaviour.

### Food Habits

Diet consists of medium-sized birds and mammals, especially ground squirrels. Prey is often taken directly from the ground.

### **Agricultural Significance:**

Protect nest sites from human disturbance. Establish a buffer zone of at least one kilometre radius around nesting sites.

Protect grasslands near suitable nesting cliffs.

### **Why the species is at risk:**

Extensive land development in the Okanagan Valley has eliminated or fragmented falcon foraging habitat (low elevation grasslands).

Human disturbance at nest sites can cause nesting failure.

Persecution of ground squirrels has reduced the Prairie Falcon's main prey.

DDT residues may still affect Prairie Falcons and their prey species.

### **Quirky Unique Anecdote:**

Grassland ground squirrels go underground and hibernate in the heat of the summer. After the young Prairie Falcons fledge, falcons often move to alpine meadows for the rest of the summer, exploiting ground squirrels in a new habitat.

### **First Nations belief about/use of the species:**

### **References:**

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