

# General Field Notes

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## Two Records of the Prairie Falcon for Northwestern South Carolina

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23 February 1979

On 19 November 1978 I observed a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) near Townville, Anderson County, S.C. The falcon was first seen as it flew up from an extensive plowed field, and I easily noticed the sandy or buffy upperparts, typical falcon head markings, and crow size. It then began to circle overhead, perhaps 150 feet above me, and I observed the moderately streaked, pale underparts and very conspicuous blackish wing linings that strongly contrasted with the pale flight feathers. Although field guides indicate that the Prairie Falcon has blackish axillars that contrast with the remainder of the wings, the bird I saw had not only black axillars, but was mottled black from the axillars to the wrist. I have found no description of this plumage in any book, yet I suspect that this may be the usual wing pattern in immature birds. Another feature that aided in identification was the build of the bird in comparison to that of the Peregrine Falcon (*F. peregrinus*). The falcon seemed noticeably slimmer and more graceful in flight than the many Peregrines that I have seen. Also, I have never seen a Peregrine around large fields, and especially not on the ground.

Remarkably, nearly a year ago I observed another large falcon near Pendleton, Anderson County, S.C., under very similar circumstances. At the time I believed the bird to have been a Prairie Falcon, but I was not certain enough to publish the sighting. However, my experience with the 1978 bird, and several conversations with Mike Tove, who has considerable experience with falcons, have led me to the conclusion that the 1977 bird was also a Prairie Falcon. On 26 November 1977 I flushed a large falcon from an extensive open area of plowed fields and grain fields. The sandy-colored upperparts were noticeable as it arose from the field, and it briefly soared high overhead. There appeared to be no black axillars; instead, there was a conspicuous mottled, dark band along the posterior edge of the wing lining. Bob Lewis independently observed an "unidentifiable" falcon on the same day approximately 1 mile from my sighting. After exchanging notes about our sightings, we concluded that we had seen the same bird. As with the 1978 sighting, the slim build of the bird, its surprising behavior (on the ground in a plowed field), and my extensive experience with the Peregrine Falcon made me suspect that the hawk in question was a Prairie Falcon.

Some people may question the validity of all Prairie Falcon sightings in the eastern United States because the birds may represent escapes from falconers. There should be little reason, however, to question the validity of the two birds I have observed. Their behavior suggested wild birds, and the locations of both sightings are

visited frequently by bird students. Also, much of the Prairie Falcon population in the western United States is migratory, and the fall season is the time of year when extralimital records of western strays in the East are most frequent.

[NOTE: There are two previous sightings of the Prairie Falcon in South Carolina; however, neither record is supported by details published in an appropriate journal. E. von Siebold Dingle observed one on two separate occasions in a wooded area near Middleburg Plantation, Berkeley County, in early May of 1973 (Lesser Squawk 25(7): 2, 1973). This individual seemed fairly tame, and on both occasions it dove unsuccessfully from its perch in a tree at passing birds; it may have been an escape. Another Prairie Falcon was observed by Perry Nugent at the U.S.D.A. Vegetable Breeding Laboratory near Charleston on 7 October 1976 (Lesser Squawk 27(10): 3, 1976; Am. Birds 31(2): 164). The Laboratory property includes extensive, open fields and some wooded areas. Nugent noted both the black axillars and the facial markings characteristic of this species. There are three records of the Prairie Falcon in Georgia (Am. Birds 30(3): 706 and 32(2): 204), and one in North Carolina (Chat 33(1): 26). The species should be placed on the South Carolina hypothetical list, pending publication of the details of previous sightings.—JRH]

## Probable Sight Record of an Ivory Gull in North Carolina

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On the morning of 29 January 1980, I followed through binoculars a gull as it flew over me and above the jetty at Fort Macon, Carteret County, N.C. The bird, which I believe was an immature Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*), disappeared from view as it neared the end of the jetty, and I suspect that it continued its same flight line to sea. Its graceful, unlabored, straight-line flight pattern attracted my attention. It was about 30 m away when first noticed, then flew directly over my head at a height of about 10-12 m. It remained at this height down the length of the jetty. From the underside I could see that the bird was small (Laughing Gull/Kittiwake size class) but it looked heavy breasted. Unfortunately, in spite of the large number and variety of gulls in the area, no others that could be used as a size reference came into binocular view. The bird's bill was small, short, and slender; the bill and legs were dark. As the bird moved away I was able to see for the first time its dorsal surface. The trailing edges of tail features, primaries, and secondaries had distinct dark spots. Apparently each spot was bordered with white, for they appeared separate and did not suggest bands. The angle of view did not provide sight of the top of the head or back, but the dorsal area was certainly light and had few if any distinct markings.

I am somewhat reluctant to report this sighting because North Carolina is significantly south of the Ivory Gull's expected winter range, because I am unable to document all field marks, and because of the extreme variability in gull plumages. Nevertheless, based on the field marks observed, all other local gull possibilities can be ruled out. These marks match classic textbook markings of an immature Ivory Gull. The following day I called John Fussell to alert him to the possibility of an Ivory Gull in the area, but he was unable to locate the bird. It is probably important to note that despite the relatively mild winter, several other gulls unusual for North Carolina were also sighted in the Beaufort-Morehead City area—Black-legged Kittiwakes (4), Lesser Black-backed Gull (2-4), apparent Iceland Gulls (2-3), and Glaucous Gull (3). Unusu-