A Tale of Discovery: The Americas' First Red-footed Falcon

E. Vernon Laux

Sunday, August 8, 2004

It all started just before noon on August 8, 2004, while birding the fields at Katama Farm, in the Town of Edgartown, on the island of Martha's Vineyard. A small group of birders, four visiting Manhattanites and I, their bird guide this day, were trudging across various mowed fields in bright sun in search of Upland Sandpipers. No luck on the sandpipers, but a couple of Ospreys, Red-tailed Hawks, and several Northern Harriers (as well as a handful of monarchs and American ladies) provided something to look at. Walking back to our vehicle, we saw a small raptor briefly hovering in the distance.

The only small raptor in this part of the world that hovers regularly is the American Kestrel. It is also the only small hawk one could reasonably expect to encounter in early August over the fields at Katama. Formerly a common bird on the island, the species has declined precipitously all over the state, and they have become very scarce as breeding birds. Getting the distant bird in binoculars, I thought something about it looked odd. Clearly, we needed a better view. This meant jogging north along a hedgerow for about a quarter of a mile to get unimpeded views. Finally, slightly winded, we arrived at a dirt road and, importantly, a break in the hedgerow. The bird could be seen hovering, hawking, and swooping at a distance.

It was being constantly harassed by both Tree and Barn swallows, which did not like the look of this curious bird. Quickly, getting the bird in the spotting scope at long range, I noted that it had what appeared to be a dark tail. Kestrel shows a rufous color on the tail. I was puzzled. When you've been birding, hard, for thirty years, and you are as familiar with North America's birds as I am, being puzzled is in itself a clue. I remember thinking to myself as I looked through the scope that it looked like a distant Peregrine Falcon, but it was too small for that. Prairie Falcon came to mind for a millisecond as I watched this bird hovering in the distance, the image dancing with heat distortion. All the time it was facing directly away from me as it flew into a fairly stiff southwest breeze.

The bird then made a turn allowing me to see the barred underwing and general coloration. Only one North American bird looks like this. Juvenile and subadult kites have barred wing linings that molt into the solid gray of the adult. I said to the assembled group, "It's an immature Mississippi Kite!"

For everyone but me, Mississippi Kite would have been a life bird. Excitement and delight gripped the group, and we patiently watched this lovely bird, acting very kestrel-like, as it swooped, hawked, and occasionally hovered at a distance. Periodically, while in aerial pursuit of a dragonfly, the bird would put on impressive,

big-falcon bursts of speed in the twenty-knot southwest wind. After we watched the bird for about ten minutes, it turned and ran with the wind soaring right over our heads, delivering "crippling views" as they say in the United Kingdom. "Ooohs" and "Aahs" all around from the group.

There had never been a live Mississippi Kite seen on the Vineyard before. (Sadly, I had discovered a still warm, dead, immature Mississippi Kite before sunrise on Saturday morning of Memorial Day Weekend in 1985.) I made a call to alert other island birders of this long-overdue first for the Vineyard. Matt Pelikan (editor of *Winging It* for the American Birding Association) of Oak Bluffs couldn't come right away, but was kind enough to phone several other people, and within twenty minutes local birders began to arrive on the scene. All were excited by this new Vineyard bird. Others came and went for the rest of the afternoon.

Having watched this cooperative bird for almost forty-five minutes, I had to leave, but on my way to my appointment, I started thinking about what I had seen. I had a little nagging feeling in the back of my head. I didn't know what exactly, but something was wrong. Then I realized in a lucid moment that it was the hovering. I have seen lots of Mississippi Kites, in migration, where they breed, in Kansas and Oklahoma, and I had never seen one hover!

The bright sun had made judging color impossible, and I wanted some pictures of this bird. So while driving, I called Sally Anderson of West Tisbury and asked her to try to get some photos. She arrived at the field around 5:30 p.m. and got some excellent photos, but like many people my age, she did not know how to download and send the photos, so she took them down to the Martha's Vineyard Times, a weekly newspaper that I write a bird column for. Unfortunately, I did not know that these images had been taken.

Monday, August 9, 2004

I was on the run early until just after 12:30 p.m. I had heard nothing about the "kite" (or Sally's photographs), and I wanted to relocate the bird and photograph it. I had one hour. Scouring the fields, I could not find the bird. So I ordered lunch at Whosie's Diner, where I had arranged to meet friend and fellow birder Lanny McDowell. We were just getting in our vehicles when I spotted the bird, hovering again a long way off toward the beach. I had to leave, but I implored Lanny, "Please get some pictures of that bird, up close, if you can." He devoted several hours to the task and managed to get some great shots.

I got home that night and found an e-mail from Lanny with photos attached. I was excited as I tried to view the images. Unfortunately, my dial-up connection has many bad days, and I was only able to open one picture, not one of the better shots. So, not as calmly or politely as I might have, I forwarded the e-mail to my friend Jeremiah Trimble who works in the Bird Department at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Jeremiah is as talented a field observer as exists. I have had the pleasure of birding with him since he was a boy. He took to his father, Peter Trimble's, passion for birding, and both have been great friends to me. I knew

the Trimbles were due back from a research trip in the Aleutian Islands and that Jeremiah would be in his office the next morning. Aside from being a brilliant field observer, he is also computer savvy, and I knew he could get at those pictures.

Tuesday, August 10, 2004

While I attended a meeting that took all morning, Jeremiah was facing the daunting task of sorting through almost three weeks of e-mail. He got to my forwarded message with its attached photos and assumed this should be easy. He opened the pictures and was stunned. Here were images of a falcon that was clearly no Mississippi Kite. According to Bob Stymeist, who also works at the Bird Department of the Museum, he arrived and found Jeremiah sitting on the floor, surrounded by study skins and all the literature he could find pertaining to Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) and the Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*). The species had recently been split; the Amur Falcon was previously considered to be the eastern race of the Red-footed Falcon. By this time, Jeremiah was wondering if I was playing a joke on him. He left a message on my cell phone.

I got out of the meeting and picked up Jeremiah's message saying he wanted to talk about the pictures. When I called him back, he asked me if I had seen the pictures, and I said, "No." He asked me if there was anything that struck me as odd or unusual about the bird. I said everything about that bird had struck me as odd, and it had been driving me crazy. I was trying to get pictures to get a better look at because the behavior was all wrong for Mississippi Kite. "So what do you think it is?" I asked.

"I think it might be a Red-footed Falcon," he answered.

I paused for a moment, stunned, synapses flashing, as the truth hit me. "That's exactly what it is," I replied. Same size and color as Mississippi Kite, and the immatures of both are extremely similar. They don't, however, occur together in the same hemisphere. Moments later the newspaper sent me the photos that Sally had taken on Sunday. I looked at the pictures, yet again stunned and elated. Sally had managed to take diagnostic photos that showed way more than what I had seen of the bird. Taken in excellent light, not the bright sunlight of midday, were shots of a Red-footed Falcon with orangey soft parts, rufous-undertail, orange orbital ring. I just about fell out of my chair. That's it then – it is a Red-footed Falcon, and we already have the photos. WOW!

I then put the general word out and had to contact everyone who had seen it and tell them it was a much bigger bird than what I had first called it. All were delighted, especially my friends in New York who were in on the original discovery. Jeremiah and Peter Trimble, Bob Stymeist, and Peter Alden proceeded at warp speed to the Vineyard. I met them, we raced out to Katama and were able to locate, photograph, and properly document and confirm the identity of the falcon. After reveling in this spectacular rarities occurrence and searing its image into our respective eyeballs, we agreed a celebration was in order.

We adjourned to Falmouth where Kristin Nuttle had prepared a veritable feast for the happy birders [see photograph on page 376]. The phone was in constant use and in

danger of burning the lines as news of the discovery exponentially radiated away from Massachusetts. This was very big news. A victory cigar, and the day was complete.

August 11-24, 2004

By 10:30 a.m. on August 11, Jeremiah's photos were posted on a web site and posted to Massbird (the Massachusetts birding information listserv). By August 12, the bird was making headlines in both local and national news outlets. The gates now were opened to a flood of birders. They came – armed with binoculars, high-powered spotting scopes, a vast array of cameras, and video gear. Passersby who wanted to look were afforded the opportunity to get an eyeful of this wayward and beautiful falcon. Birders reveled in the chance to share their passion, knowledge, and equipment with others.

By Saturday, August 14, the first weekend day after the discovery, a veritable army of birders arrived on the Vineyard. They lined the roads surrounding the Katama Airpark, and they in turn attracted vacationers, beachgoers, joggers, and proprietors of lemonade stands, all of which created an unforgettable scene. The number of birders by noon peaked at approximately 1000 individuals. Virtually every minute a taxi would arrive with yet another group; they piled out rapidly, expectations brimming. They came from all over the map, often having flown or driven all night, determined to catch the early ferry to the island. Many were bleary eyed, bewildered, tired, and wondering if they had done the right thing. Would the bird appear? Then, grinning from ear to ear, high-fiving companions and strangers alike, they rejoiced when the falcon arrived.

For its part the falcon was completely unimpressed by all the attention. With its powers of flight and worldly ways, having crossed more of the planet than seems possible, the bird cared little about the terrestrial bipeds who littered the edges of its feeding area. It had found an ideal habitat in which to spend the summer – this preserved sandplain grassland (a tip of the hat to the Nature Conservancy).

The falcon found plenty to eat in the form of long-legged bright green grasshoppers that it captured by dropping from a hover to the ground. It was also observed catching and eating at least five field mice. The most exciting chases occurred when the falcon launched off a perch (often an airport sign) in aerial pursuit of a high-flying dragonfly. It "ringed" up into the air, rapidly gaining altitude, often flying over a half a mile, before the target become visible to the human observer. In a lightning-fast strike, the bird grabbed its intended prey in its talons and then dispatched it with a bite from its beak. At one point, as it dismembered a dragonfly over the assembled group of birders, the crowd actually cheered.

From an observer's standpoint it was a perfect bird. The only day during its stay that it failed to be completely reliable was Monday, August 16, when the northeast wind and rainy conditions suppressed insect activity and made hunting difficult. The bird was not stupid, so it stayed roosting out of the weather to save energy. It made a brief cameo at 12:20 p.m., quickly realized there was nothing to be gained, and took

cover from the nasty conditions. But even on this day, when no raptor in its right mind would waste time attempting to hunt, persistent observers got the bird.

Postscript

The last sighting of the falcon was 12:30 p.m. on August 24, when a group of birders watched it sail off to the south. Its identity had been established with confidence (see David Sibley's discussion in this issue). How it managed to get to Martha's Vineyard remains a subject of interested speculation (see Julian Hough's summary in this issue).

Now that the North American birding community is alerted, in all likelihood there will be more sightings in the future. I think there is a good chance the Vineyard bird will return next summer after wintering in South America, since it imprinted on the Katama field and found lots of food. It is safe to say that hawk counters and birders everywhere (especially on the eastern seaboard) will be taking much closer looks at passing kites.

There are many lessons to be learned from this discovery that almost wasn't. I certainly got a big helping of humble pie, yet I am tickled that in the end we got it right. A collaborative effort was needed, illustrating yet again the importance of friendship.

The best thing about this story is that the one that almost got away did not.

Vern Laux *is a realtor on Martha's Vineyard, an occupation which allows him the flexible hours necessary for a dedicated birder. He has visited all seven continents in pursuit of birds, often as a tour guide. He is featured on NPR's local stations WCAI and WNAN as a permanent guest on* The Point, *a show which includes discussion about birds. His weekly column on birds appears in the* Martha's Vineyard Times. *He has contributed articles to publications including the* New York Times, Birding, *and* Birder's World *magazines, and is the author of the book* Bird News: Vagrants and Visitors on a Peculiar Island. *He is no stranger to discovering rarities in Massachusetts. He first identified a Common Cuckoo (May 1981) and a Shiny Cowbird (October 2002). Only a month before finding the Red-footed Falcon he discovered a Black-tailed Gull, which will be a first or second state record if accepted by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee.*

THE AUTHOR AT KATAMA, PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER ALDEN