

Identification of the Martha's Vineyard Red-footed Falcon

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The first North American record of Red-footed Falcon was found on a small airstrip managed by the Nature Conservancy on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. It was first discovered on August 8, 2004, by Vernon Laux, conclusively identified on August 10 by Jeremiah Trimble, and seen daily until August 24.

In the justifiable excitement over the appearance of this fantastic little falcon in Massachusetts, there was lots of interest in its identification. While the bird is relatively easy to separate from all other North American and European falcons, there is a closely related species from Asia, the Amur Falcon, which could easily wander to North America (maybe "easily" is the wrong word, but I think it's only a little less likely than Red-footed in Massachusetts). There is no doubt that the Martha's Vineyard bird was a Red-footed Falcon, but how the bird was identified is of interest.

The key feature used to separate adult male (Western) Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) from the closely related Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*) is the color of the underwing coverts. These are all gray in adult Red-footed and all white in adult Amur. Unfortunately, juvenile males of both species have barred underwing coverts until about one year of age, and the Martha's Vineyard bird had just begun to molt those feathers. Many first-summer male Red-footed Falcons are farther along in their molt by mid-August and have the underwing coverts mostly gray, but this was not the case here, and the underwing coverts of the Martha's Vineyard bird were still almost entirely juvenal feathers. Furthermore, the typical views of the Martha's Vineyard bird — against a bright hazy sky and in brief, low, erratic flights — made it very difficult to obtain a clear view of the underwing coverts.

On August 11, 2004, I spent six hours watching the bird and intently trying to see any diagnostic feathers on the underwing. This was a very frustrating exercise since, depending on the lighting, the underwing coverts could look uniformly dark gray or pale buffy-white with fine barring. Fortunately, photographs by Jeremiah Trimble, Peter Alden, and others revealed that there were a few diagnostic gray feathers on the underwing coverts, and in retrospect I think I did see this in the field several times. Observers who wanted to convince themselves in the field that they were seeing the gray feathers of a Red-footed Falcon needed to have very good views of these specific coverts. As Julian Hough commented, he would have been hard pressed to identify this as a Red-footed rather than Amur falcon if it had flown past a hawkwatch site.

There are other features that make this bird a Red-footed Falcon, and the best reference is a paper titled "Identification of Amur Falcon" by Andrea Corso and William S. Clark, illustrated by Ian Lewington, and published in *Birding World* 11 (7).

On adult males the upperside of the tail is darker than the back in Red-footed, and about the same shade of gray as the back in Amur. The Martha's Vineyard bird



Illustration showing the Martha's Vineyard Red-footed Falcon in flight with the underwing coverts in shadow (left) and in sunlight (right). Both of these views are misleading. I've hinted at the few gray middle coverts in the brightly lit illustration on the right, but I believe that the bright light washes out the gray so that it blends in with the surrounding barred feathers. Presumably, if the bird was an Amur Falcon and these incoming feathers were white, they would be more conspicuous among the barred coverts. However, the generally blotchy, molting appearance and the normal shadows and contours of the feather tracts make these few small feathers very difficult to pick out. In flight the two incoming blackish adult primaries are obvious around the middle of the wing.

had molted about four central tail feathers, and these new adult feathers were distinctly darker than the back: slaty-blackish with a slightly darker band at the tip, correct for Red-footed.

First summer male Red-footeds show smudges of pale reddish brown within the gray breast, while Amur lacks this reddish color and usually shows broad dark streaks on the belly. The Martha's Vineyard bird showed some small patches of reddish brown on the breast, and only very fine dark streaks on the flank feathers. This was difficult to see in the field.

Juvenile male Red-footed Falcons usually have the barring on the underwing coverts reddish brown, while on Amur the barring is usually blackish. There is apparently some overlap in color, but the Martha's Vineyard bird clearly had reddish-brown barring on the underwing coverts, and this was visible in the field whenever the underwing coverts were well-lit.

And some comments:

Ferguson-Lees and Christie (2001. *Raptors of the World*) report that the wingtips of the Red-footed reach or exceed the tail tip when perched, while on Amur the wingtips fall just short of the tail tip. The Martha's Vineyard bird in my view showed wingtips just about equal to the tail tip, sometimes looking slightly shorter or minutely longer, depending on the angle, but another observer reported that the wingtips looked consistently shorter than the tail. Obviously this is tricky to ascertain, and it could be more complicated since adults and juveniles may have different proportions.

The illustration in the *Handbook of Birds of the World* (Volume 2, 1994) shows the Amur Falcon with white along the bend of the wing when perched. This may be a distinction from the gray of adult Red-footed, but is not useful on immatures, since the Martha's Vineyard bird showed a white edge there as well and often revealed a few bright white feathers at the bend of the wing when preening or stretching. 📌

David Sibley, son of the well-known ornithologist Fred Sibley, began seriously watching and drawing birds in 1969, at age seven. Since 1980 David has traveled throughout the North American continent in search of birds, both on his own and as a leader of birdwatching tours, and has lived in California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia, New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. This intensive travel and bird study culminated in the publication of his comprehensive guide to bird identification The Sibley Guide to Birds (National Audubon Society) in the fall of 2000, and the companion volume The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior the following year. In the fall of 2002 Sibley's Birding Basics, an introduction to bird identification, was published, and in spring 2003 the Sibley Guides to Eastern and Western Birds were released. David now lives in Concord, Massachusetts, where he continues to study and draw birds. You can learn more about his work at <<http://www.sibleyguides.com>>. He would like to thank Vernon Laux, Jeremiah Trimble, Chris Elphick, Peter Alden, Julian Hough, and David Cooper for assistance and comments.



Illustration of the Red-footed Falcon perched [see cover]. The smooth gray color is unlike any North American Falcon. Old juvenal wing and tail feathers are slightly brownish and barred, while adult feathers will be uniformly blackish. Juvenal feathers are obvious on the outer tail, the primaries (molt reveals the boldly barred inner web of one outer primary), the brownish and faintly barred tertials and secondaries, and some brownish wing coverts. The pale cheeks, small dark "mustache," and buffy nape are also immature features. All of these things show that the bird is in its "first summer," born in 2003 just over one year ago.