

Massachusetts Miracles: The Gull and the Falcon

Wayne R. Petersen and Paul J. Baicich

They came spontaneously, from across the country, to bear witness to a miracle — the appearance of a lipstick-colored gull that had absolutely no sane right to be there. ‘The Bird of the Century,’ as some have called it.

This is how a leading spokesperson for birders, Pete Dunne, described the 1975 appearance of a Ross’s Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in his 1992 book, *The Feather Quest*. Nearly thirty years after the appearance of the gull, noted author and bird artist, David Allen Sibley, was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing” when referring to the Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) that appeared on Martha’s Vineyard in August 2004.

Comments such as these from the likes of Pete Dunne and David Sibley underscore the fact that there was obviously something very special, almost mystical, about the occurrence of these two birds in New England. Unequivocally, from the perspective of avian vagrancy, the appearance of a Red-footed Falcon in Massachusetts is matchless, since the species has never before been recorded in the Americas. And although subsequent to 1975, Ross’s Gulls have been recorded in over a dozen states in the lower forty-eight United States, in 1975, the appearance of the species in Newburyport was unprecedented. But precedent and geographical rarity aside, there is another dimension to these events and another story that needs to be told. The background for this other story, particularly in the case of the Red-footed Falcon, is that the falcon’s appearance involved just the right bird, at just the right place, at just the right time, with just the right individual to “host, toast, and share” the alien visitor with the public at large. But lest we get too far ahead in the story, more background is critical in order to understand the point of this commentary.

There had never before been a birding event in North America generating anything like the frenzy created by the initial visit of a Ross’s Gull to Newburyport. Longtime birders who vividly recall the state’s initial visit by a Ross’s Gull inevitably made comparisons between the gull and the recent occurrence of the Red-footed Falcon at Martha’s Vineyard. It was said that the Ross’s Gull might have drawn up to 10,000 visitors during its protracted stay in Newburyport. By comparison, Vern Laux, discoverer of the Red-footed Falcon and gracious host to many of the birders who came to observe it, estimated that “the biggest crowds were on Saturday, August 14, the first weekend day after the find. Estimates of observer numbers ranged from 1500 to 2500, just for that day. At one point late in the morning there were more than 1000 people congregated.” It is important to note, however, that the falcon was only present on Martha’s Vineyard for two weeks, while the gull stayed for months.

Regardless of the actual numbers and final figures, however, one thing seems pretty clear. “This falcon [was] probably a bigger find than the Ross’s Gull,” said Steve Grinley, well-known birder and owner of the Bird Watcher’s Supply and Gifts in Newburyport. Grinley further noted, “[If the Ross’s Gull] was ‘The Bird of the



RED-FOOTED FALCON BY PETER ALDEN



ROSS'S GULL BY PETER ALDEN

Century,' [the Red-footed Falcon] is going to be the bird of THIS century." Just like big league baseball fanatics who argue over who was the greatest slugger of all times, or boxing aficionados who debate who the most potent prize fighter in history might have been, it really does not matter, because in this case the *real story* is something far more important than the birds themselves. The real story lies in the fact that both the media and the general public made so much of these spectacular avian visitors. The recent focus of attention on the Red-footed Falcon reinforces everything we hear and read about the numbers of people interested in birds these days. Or, as Pete Dunne reflected when writing of the birders who made the pilgrimage to Newburyport in 1975 "to bear witness to a miracle," they "discovered something that took them completely by surprise. They discovered that they were many. They have never forgotten that lesson."

Not only are there many more birders today than there were thirty years ago, but also technology and logistics have evolved to the falcon's advantage. Information about the bird traveled farther and faster than was even remotely possible when the Ross's Gull was discovered in 1975. Word of the falcon's appearance spread with phenomenal quickness. After its initial discovery, the Red-footed Falcon was ultimately identified from digital images taken through a telescope — itself a new and rapidly growing field technique — and the bird's presence on Martha's Vineyard was literally announced worldwide overnight via the Internet. No longer were old-fashioned phone-trees, recorded bird alerts, or unreliable birding grapevines needed to publicize the wandering raptor. Information and images pertaining to the bird were shared globally within hours after its discovery and identification.

Clearly, the Red-footed Falcon was a glamour-bird, a fact underscored by Vern Laux when he pointed out that "A raptor is sexy. [It] ain't no striped, stinking little flycatcher." But the Ross's Gull in Newburyport had its own charisma; what made the falcon so special? Many glitteringly rare vagrants regularly show up on remote islands in the Bering Sea or miles from shore in the Gulf Stream off North Carolina's Outer Banks, but unlike vagrants in these localities, the falcon was accessible, both seasonally and geographically! It was within the reach of huge numbers of birders, along with a greater number of people who came to view the bird, yet did not even

consider themselves birders.

The fact that the falcon took up residence at a high-use vacation area at the height of the tourist season, not late winter as was the case with the Ross's Gull, was critical to the phenomenon that ensued. For many people vacations are a time to do things slightly out of the ordinary, so at Martha's Vineyard in August, the stage was perfect for curious vacationers, as well as avid birders, to investigate something "slightly out of the ordinary." The essence of this synergistic event, however, was that the timing and place of the falcon's visit afforded a splendid opportunity to reveal both a spectacular bird, and birding as an activity, to many hundreds of inquisitive people. This coalescence of observers, neophytes and experienced alike, prompted noted birding celebrities and authors, Don and Lillian Stokes, to comment, "We let lots of people (including one great 10-year old youth) view the bird in our scope and providing an 'Oh, Wow!' birding moment for each of them. We [also] answered lots of questions about 'The Bird,' and birds and birding in general for many nonbirders — kind of like an impromptu birding seminar."

In addition to the already mentioned technological advances that contributed to "Falcon Mania," mention needs also to be made of transportation efficiency. The ability of people to quickly mobilize and efficiently travel is far greater today than it was in 1975. Within one or two days following the falcon's discovery, out-of-region birders (beyond the Northeast) began arriving from as far away as California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia. Adding to the sudden influx of birders was the flood of curiosity-seekers resulting from the influence of the media. During its two-week stay at the Katama Air Park, the Red-footed Falcon received front page billing and significant national coverage in such prestigious publications as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. Besides the extensive coverage provided by the local Massachusetts media, including newspapers, radio, and television, Vern Laux debuted on ABC News as "Person of the Week" for August 27. When a *birder* achieves his "15-minutes of fame" as "Person of the Week" on the evening national news, a major statement has been made about what birding has become in this country in the 21st century.

The importance of the role played by Vern Laux himself must not be overlooked or underestimated when reflecting on the "Miracle Falcon." Throughout the Red-footed Falcon's entire stay on Martha's Vineyard, Vern was the perfect ambassador and ideal spokesperson, not just for the falcon, but for birders everywhere. During the excitement and fanfare following the original discovery of the rarity, Vern successfully managed to conduct himself with humility, good nature, unselfishness, and unbounded enthusiasm. In the print media, some of which he artfully crafted himself, as well as in person, Vern brought nothing but credibility and respect to birding and the marvelous pastime that it is. Birders everywhere should take note.

The appearance of mega-rarities such as the Red-footed Falcon and Ross's Gull inevitably bring more than publicity to the venues where they occur. On Martha's Vineyard, where things were already in overdrive for the summer, local commerce received an additional birder-boost with the discovery of the Red-footed Falcon. Carol

Ward, spokesperson at the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce, summarized the economic scene by pointing out that "We got tons of calls about the bird. It was incredible the amount of excitement it generated." Taxi drivers quickly got into the routine of meeting all incoming Vineyard ferries and promptly packing birders into their cabs for what practically became a shuttle service to the Katama Air Park. Whosie's, a small restaurant at the Katama Air Park, did a thriving business throughout the falcon's tenure. Morgan Hauck, a waitress at Whosie's, reported that the falcon's surprise visit was definitely good for business. She indicated that she had been scheduled to be off for two days, but because the restaurant was crowded with hungry, thirsty birders, she remained on the job, and took in about \$200 over lunch alone. Satisfied birders from far and near crowded daily around lunch tables or the restaurant's veranda to enjoy a sandwich or cold beverage while swapping falcon or other birding stories. Whosie's owner, Rebecca Lundstrom, commented that "The birders were fun to have around, and except for their scopes and tripods getting in the way, we had a great time. There were crowds, but the birders were easy to please."

In case the birding frenzy, social and economic impact, and media attention created by the appearance of the Red-footed Falcon on Martha's Vineyard were not enough to grab the attention of thoughtful birders, there is an additional component that provides the ultimate silver lining. What if the Katama Plains on Martha's Vineyard did not exist? Had it not been for intense and decisive protection efforts by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to protect and preserve this highly desirable and egregiously expensive piece of property on an island where real estate prices can only be described as chilling, the very habitat that sustained the exotic summer visitor would not exist. Kendra Buresch, an ecologist for the island's TNC office, indicated that the Katama Plain represents a unique sandplain grassland habitat that essentially only occurs from Long Island, New York, to Cape Cod. (Birders with a penchant for nostalgia may recall that Katama is not far from the area where the now-extinct Heath Hen made its final stand on the planet until 1932.) The Katama Plains are owned by the community of Edgartown and have been creatively managed since the 1980s by TNC and the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The entire area is divided into three management units, each on a four-year rotating schedule that includes prescribed burning followed by mowing in the same year. That this management regimen works is proved by the fact that the Katama area has hosted a number of unusual birds and other wildlife species through the years. For example, the senior author of this article observed his only Massachusetts Burrowing Owl at this locality, along with some of the last regal fritillary butterflies ever to occur in New England. Today, thanks to the carefully managed regimen of mowing and prescribed burning, Upland Sandpipers and Grasshopper Sparrows, both Massachusetts state endangered species, have returned to nest in the area. Katama is indeed a unique and wonderful place, which provides a stunning example of how effective ecological management can benefit birds, including some of the rarest of the rare.

So, one might ask, what is the takeaway message in this tale of "Massachusetts

Miracles?" It is simply this: birds like the Red-footed Falcon and the Ross's Gull become bigger than life. Each opens a window to views of a higher plane — a plane that features frenzied excitement, invites curiosity and speculation, offers beauty and satisfaction, and provides reward and fulfillment — not just to birders, but to all who come to look, to learn, and even to profit from visits by The Gull and The Falcon.

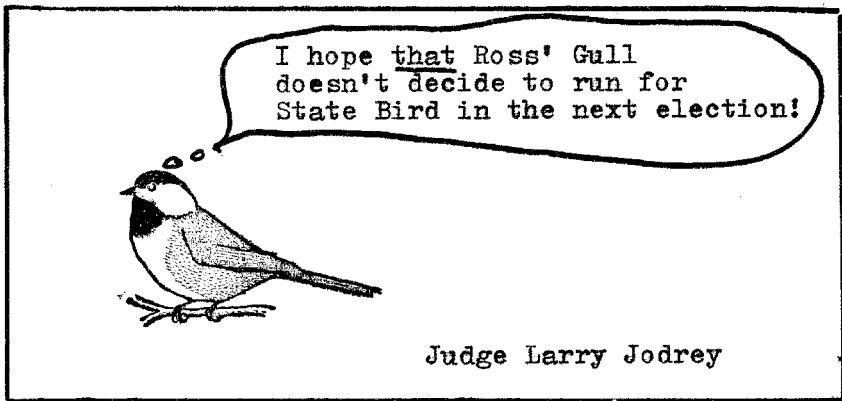
Wayne R. Petersen and Paul J. Baicich promote birding for Swarovski Birding, an initiative of Swarovski Optik – North America. Both authors vividly recall the excitement surrounding the Ross's Gull in Newburyport, and both were equally thrilled to see the Red-footed Falcon on Martha's Vineyard. Each has made numerous contributions to birding literature as author and editor.



VIEWING THE RED-FOOTED FALCON BY EDDIE GILES



VIEWING THE ROSS'S GULL BY MIKE LASALANDRA (THE NEWBURYPORT DAILY NEWS, MARCH 10, 1975)



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