

REVIEW

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The Prairie Falcon.—Stanley H. Anderson and John R. Squires. 1997. University of Texas Press, Austin. ISBN 0-292-70474-7. \$16.95 paper, \$29.95 cloth. 168 pp., 19 color photographs, 8 line drawings, 1 map, 2 figs. Both authors live in Laramie, Wyoming, where they have had a long association with Prairie Falcons, the North American “desert falcon”. Other desert falcons are the arctic Gyrfalcon and the Old World Saker, Lanner, and Laggar. Desert falcons are powerful, fast fliers, usually catching mammals, birds, and reptiles by low, rapid flights, in contrast to the stoops from high elevation typical of Peregrine Falcons.

The book is written for a general audience. The authors hope to stimulate interest in Prairie Falcons and to promote conservation of this magnificent bird. Although the authors clearly aim for scientific accuracy, citing the substantial pertinent literature, their book is a compilation of research by others plus their own general observations on Prairie Falcons. It is not a monograph reporting original research.

The book has four main sections. The first describes Prairie Falcons, discusses distribution and nest sites, hunting and food habits, and ecological interactions. Then comes a section on seasonal activities, a brief section on other raptors, and finally a discussion of Prairie Falcons and people, including falconry, pesticides, and captive breeding.

The cover has a handsome photo of a Prairie Falcon. The general layout of the book is attractive, and the writing is mostly clear. The 19 colored photos of falcons and falcon habitat and their captions are printed tipped to the left about 10 degrees. The book's designer must regard this odd presentation as attractive; by my old-fashioned standards, it is annoying and distracting—each new photo encountered looks accidentally askew. The line drawings are mostly re-drawn from other sources. But the re-drawings are crude and sometimes misrepresent the source drawing. For example, the cartoonish Fig. 3 on page 58, is labeled “Feeding display during Prairie Falcon courtship. After Cade 1982.” But the original drawing on page 42 of Cade's “The Falcons of the World” (1982, Cornell Univ. Press) is actually a beautiful drawing of peregrine courtship-feeding. Although the Anderson-Squires version is “credited” to Cade in a sense, it is wrong for them to imply without comment that Prairie Falcon courtship is identical with that of the Peregrine Falcon and that their shapes and body proportions are identical. In the Cade drawing the food being presented is part of a small bird; in the Prairie Falcon sketch it has been transformed into a ground squirrel. Drawings on pages 56, 60 and 61, showing head-low display, hitched-wing display, and copulation, are also re-drawn from Cade's book. Again, elegantly rendered Peregrine Falcons are transformed crudely into caricatures of Prairie Falcons. Any reader would be excused for concluding that Cade's book actually had drawings or photos of these displays of the Prairie Falcon. It does not.

Having a single-volume popular treatment of this splendid bird is welcome. Unfortunately, the deficiencies of the re-drawn figures are repeated in the text. Once more, the authors list their sources at the end of each chapter and in the literature cited section at the end of the book. But there are no references to sources within the text (probably to prevent reader distraction), nor are quotations acknowledged for some material lifted verbatim or nearly so from other works.

Here is one example:

—Anderson and Squires, p. 103: “The Saker is another favorite hunting bird of Arab falconers. It is a smaller, rough-and-tumble version of the Gyrfalcon.”

—Cade, p. 80: “Favorite hunting bird of Arab falconers, the saker is a rough-and-tumble version of the gyrfalcon.”

The chapter titled “Prairie Falcons and Other Raptors” begins with a strange listing (pp. 87-90) of categories that suggests that eagles are the only members of the Family Ac-

cipitridae; harriers, accipiters, buteos, and falcons are listed confusingly below Osprey (Pandionidae), with no indication of what families they belong in. The authors know better; they straighten this out several pages later (pp. 100-101). A section on evolution attempts to sketch avian history from reptilian ancestors. Again, the treatment is so brief that it is not helpful and might better have been omitted. Hesperornis, for example, is described as resembling modern cormorants, with teeth, a long flexible neck, and a relatively short tail; the fact that it was essentially wingless is not mentioned. A surprising conclusion of the evolution section is: "In all likelihood, the grassland [= desert] falcons did not have an immediate common ancestor but evolved from forest-type falcons near the open areas they now inhabit." I doubt if this opinion is shared by any thoughtful student of raptor phylogeny. In the section "Other Desert Falcons," Anderson and Squires state that "Sakers often build stick nests in trees." This will come as a surprise to Tom Cade, whose treatment of alleged stick nest building in his monograph clearly indicates that he does not think any falcon does this, or at least that proof by direct observation has yet to be reported.

Despite these weak points, the book does its main job effectively. It portrays the Prairie Falcon as a magnificent raptor, uniquely adapted to its harsh, dry environment. The authors' respect for the bird and their love of the fine country it lives in shines through the text. Even though Prairie Falcons do not occur in Florida, the book provides a good summary for a general audience of Prairie Falcon biology in a single attractive volume. It would be a useful addition to school and community libraries.—**Harrison B. Tordoff**, Bell Museum of Natural History and Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior, University of Minnesota, 100 Ecology, 1987 Upper Buford Circle, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108.