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THE NESTING OF THE PRAIRIE FALCON IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

By WILLIAM LEON DAWSON

WITH FIVE PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND ONE DRAWING BY ALLAN BROOKS

THE 'problem of evil' has always bothered the theologian, and he is bound to wrestle with it, because inconsistency is intolerable in religious thinking. But the bird-lover cannot be consistent. Within his little province he cannot "love good and hate evil", for to do so were to lose that *joy in variety* which is his endless delight. Nature herself is inconsistent—fearfully so. Indeed, it is she who has set theology's problem. And if there be a "higher unity" or "religious synthesis" (and I believe there is) we as nature students have naught to do with it. If we are to find satisfaction in things as they are, if we are to enjoy nature, external nature, we must surrender ourselves to admiration of beak and talon no less than of wing and song. We may champion the cause of our specialty—Birds against the world, if you like, and death to cat, weasel, and serpent—but you cannot adjudicate as between magpie and chick, hawk and sparrow, raptor and raptee. Or if you do, you will only make yourself miserable, and wherefore?

All of which is artful preface to a declaration of love for that arch scamp and winged terror, the Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*). Ruthless he is, and cruel as death; but ah, isn't he superb! To recall his image is to obtain release from imprisoning walls, glad exit from formal gardens and the chirping of sparrows. To recall his scream is to set foot on the instant upon the bastion of some fortress of the wilderness. Away with your orange-bowered bungalows! Give me a sun-burned battlement in the hills of San Luis Obispo County. A plague on your dickey birds! Let me dare the displeasure of the noble falcon as he falls like a bolt from the avenging blue and shrieks out his awful rage.

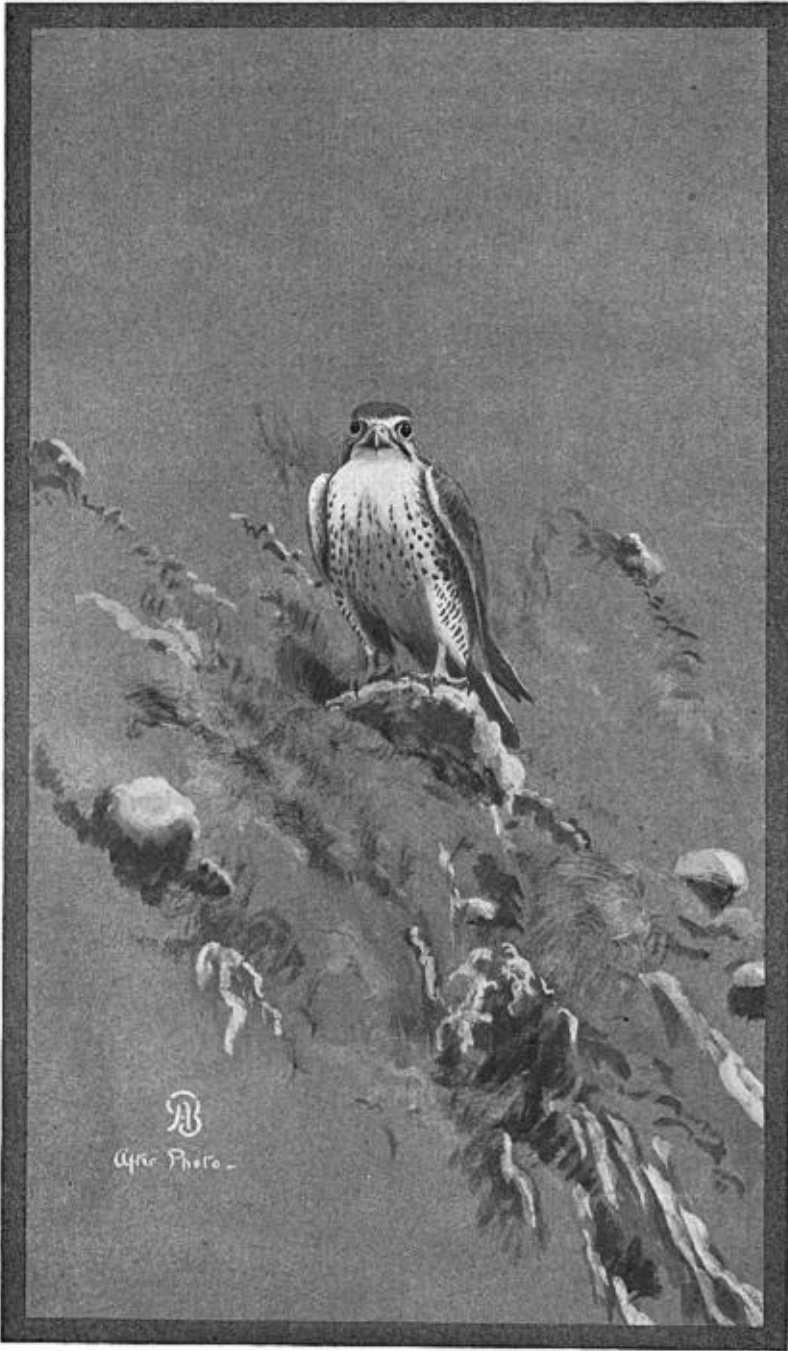


Fig. 9. REGARDANT
Redrawn by Allan Brooks after photo by W. L. Dawson

Curse for curse and blow for blow, you jolly old pirate! Hide your treasures in the remotest cranny of the uttermost wilderness, if you will, and I shall find them; and if I find them, they are mine; and if I reach them, you may wreak your vengeance on whom you will. I will not even reproach you for the rape of pullets nor the carnage of quails. Go to it, old sport! Fill the air with shrieks and call heaven to witness what a rogue you are! Aye, but you're a gay fowl, and I'm o'er fond of you!

The first requirement of the Prairie Falcon is open country; and the second a cranny where she may lay her young. These conditions are ideally met in a low range of hills which run north and south through eastern San Luis Obispo County, and form the back-bone of that "cattle country" made famous in story and song by deeds of vaquero and misdeeds of brigand. To the westward lie other rolling hills carpeted with bunch grass and dotted with oaks. To the eastward stretches the arid interior plain. This cardinal ridge, by reason of the

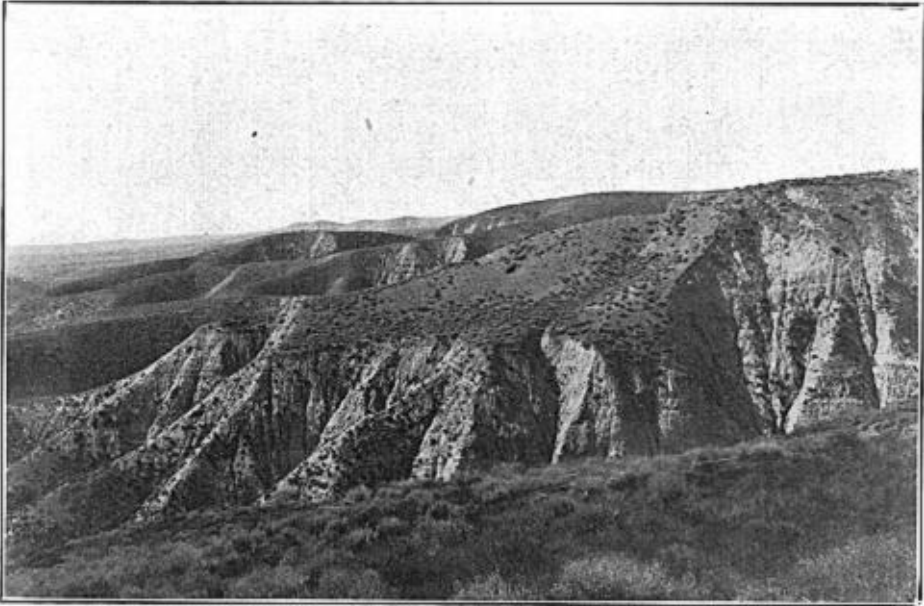


Fig. 10. A NESTING HAUNT OF THE PRAIRIE FALCON

torrential character of the occasional rains of that country, is deeply scored by lateral canyons, and "breaks" in a thousand walls, walls which vary in appearance from the sloping adobe of the north to the rugged escarpments of sandstone, conglomerate, and Pecten beds, which front the upper San Juan. Here are the castles, and there are the banquetting tables. For the presence of cattle means insects, and insects imply insect-eating birds, and *Insectivores* mean *Raptors*. If we use birds-of-prey in the economic instead of the structural sense, and so include Magpie, Raven, and Shrike, then this cattle country is ravaged by no less than 23 species of feathered bandits (and ghouls); and of these we actually saw nineteen in the course of a three weeks' reconnoissance last April.

Of *Falcones* proper, after the ubiquitous Kestrel (why "Sparrowhawk"?), the Prairie Falcon is most numerous in fact and least evident to casual notice. It is his proper domain, but he rules it invisibly, from on high. His business with

earth is quickly despatched, and he is off again, while the slow eye, especially of the breeder of hens, settles upon the soaring Buteo as the presumptive culprit. While his visits to the poultry yard are by no means rare, and his offenses, judged from this narrow human angle, are serious, we shall not stop to plead the thousands of destructive squirrels which this bird accounts for, but only hasten on to view him, or rather her, at home.

The first scene is a wild adobe amphitheater, the most distant in the "general view" herewith presented. A few shrubs manage to cling to the upper reaches of the great earthen funnel; but as the walls descend the pitch increases,

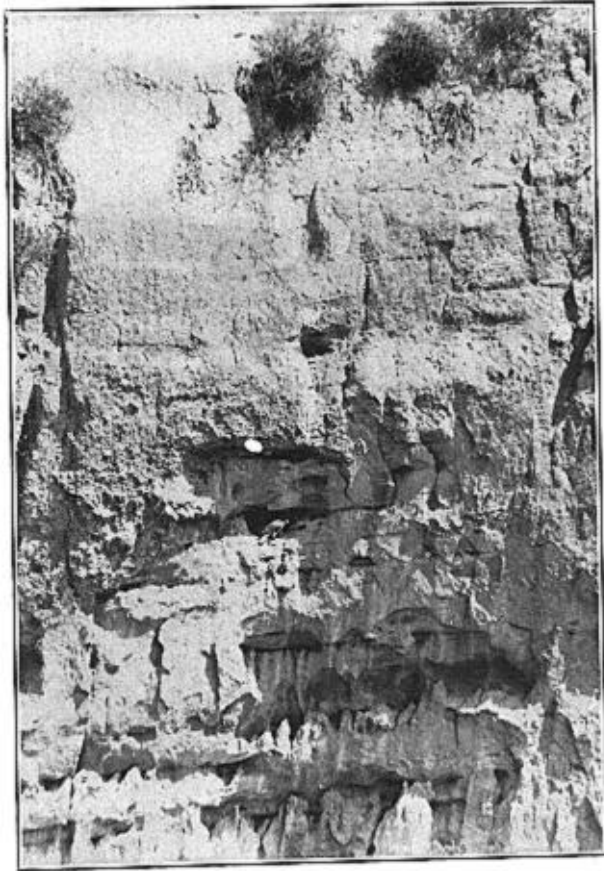


Fig. 11. CAUGHT AT HOME: FEMALE PRAIRIE FALCON
AT MOUTH OF NESTING CRANNY

until the vortex, 400 feet below, is fronted by walls perpendicular, or even undercut. Here at a point midway of the basal wall, Truesdale's practiced eye discerned a Prairie Falcon squatting upon a shady shelf. I stood on the very uppermost brim of the funnel whose edges fell away sharply on either hand, and from my station it did not seem that a bird could find footing, let alone lodgment, on the wall against which this Falcon had set herself. Yet a determined facing of the problem of approach brought a sure solution. We set an iron peg down some forty feet over the brim, then made fast and cast off the 60-foot rope with which we were provided, and found that it thus exceeded the nest by fifteen feet. To have

gone down from above would have meant some risk, as well as an accompaniment of blinding dust, so "Kelly" made a detour and attacked from below. By dint of carving steps with a hammer he succeeded at last in clutching the dangling rope-end, and so reached the coveted shelf. The Falcon meanwhile made the great amphitheater resound with malediction, and charged about in a fashion to make the beholder dizzy as he watched her passage across the fluted background. Her anger made our visit memorable, but it failed to arouse her mate, who was doubtless off hunting in the basin country.

Though slow to take alarm, the Falcon once roused from the nest becomes very wary. It was doubly fortunate, therefore, that the bird photographed in one accompanying picture could be approached under cover, and suddenly confronted from a convenient spur just opposite. To reach this nest our intrepid guide, Dean Brown, went down hand over hand the full length of a 140-foot

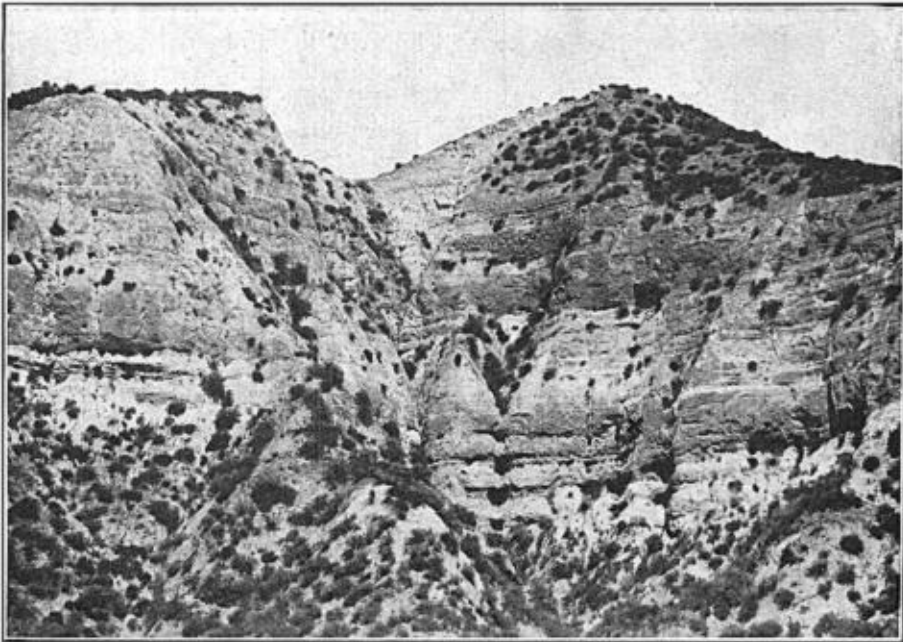


Fig. 12. A TYPICAL NESTING CLIFF. X INDICATES POSITION OF CLIMBER

rope. A bird who knows she is under surveillance will never resume a position on the eggs; but she will intersperse her nervous and often distant excursions by prolonged rests on some favorite perch or commanding knob. And this she is the more ready to do if the observer himself remains quiet. A resumption of hostilities sends her off on the instant to scream and soar or tower and stoop.

In about half the cases noted the male bird, who was in no instance the siter, responded to the summons of his mate and joined in the outcry. He was quite as loud, but not quite so persistent in denunciation as the female; and I could not detect any difference in the notes as between the sexes, such as exists in the case of the American Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus anatum*).

The assaults of an angry Falcon are really dangerous. Even when the earliest efforts are discouraged by a show of stick or stones, it is decidedly disconcerting to feel the rush of air from a passing falcon-wing upon your hatless

pate, or to mark the instant change in pitch from the shrill uproar of impending doom to the guttural notes of baffled retreat. The Falcon has a nasty temper at best, and if she dare not vent her spite on you, she will fall upon the first wight who crosses her path. Woe betide the luckless Barn Owl who flaps forth from his polluted den hard by to learn the cause of the disturbance. I have seen such bowled into the sage in a trice, and Kelly declares that he has several times seen them struck dead. At such times also the Raven is put on trial for his life. In spite of their close association, there is evidently an ancient grudge between these birds. Whether or no the ebony saint be at fault, I cannot tell, but certain it is that if a Raven blunders near in the hour of the Falcon's high displeasure, he is fearfully beset. The Raven is an adept at wing-play himself, and the Falcon's thunderbolt is met with a deft evasion which reminds one of the best sword-play.

But the Raven takes no pleasure in it. His eyes start with terror, and while he has no time for utterance himself, the distressed cries of his mate proclaim the danger he is in.

This close association of Falcon and Raven at nesting time is the strangest element in the lives of both of them. To be sure their requirements of nesting sites are similar; but it is more than that which induces the birds to nest within a hundred yards of each other in the same canyon, when neighboring or distant canyons offering as excellent sites are empty. So constant indeed is this association that when one finds the Raven's nest, he says, "Well, now, where is the Falcon's?" Of the entire number of Raven's nests which came under my personal notice this year, seven were thus associated with the Falcon's in the same canyon, and the remaining three were within a quarter of a mile of Falcon's in neighboring canyons separated by a single ridge. And it is impossible to tell



Fig. 13. PIRATE OF THE CLOUDS

from the stage of incubation reached which bird is the follower. In two instances, nests containing young Ravens were associated with Falcons whose eggs had not yet hatched; but in another notably close instance, the Raven laid her first egg on the day the Falcon's eggs were pipped. The remaining instances were neutral; i. e., nests of both species contained eggs. The only guess we dare hazard is that both birds reap advantages of warning in case of hostile approach.

Concurrent with this association is the annual, or at least occasional, shifting of sites on the part of both species. This shifting is of course quickened by persecution. If unsuccessful in raising a brood one year the bird will try another situation, but always, except in extreme instances, in the same canyon or general locality. In this way the Falcon appropriates the site once occupied by Ra-

vens (and so gets credited with a "stick" nest, though I am satisfied that the Falcon never lifts a twig); and the Ravens, in turn, without opposition, are allowed to rear their pile in a niche just previously occupied by the Falcons. The ruses adopted by birds hard pressed are sometimes humorously pathetic. A Falcon which last year occupied the front of a noble escarpment in a wild valley (and forfeited four clouded beauties thereby), was found this year after a lengthy search, in a tiny niche once occupied by a Road-runner, on the back, or hill-facing side, of a minor sandstone tooth, and not over twenty feet from the ground. The retreat had been betrayed by an incautious line of white excrement, and the occupant, when summoned by a shout from the triumphant Kelly, looked

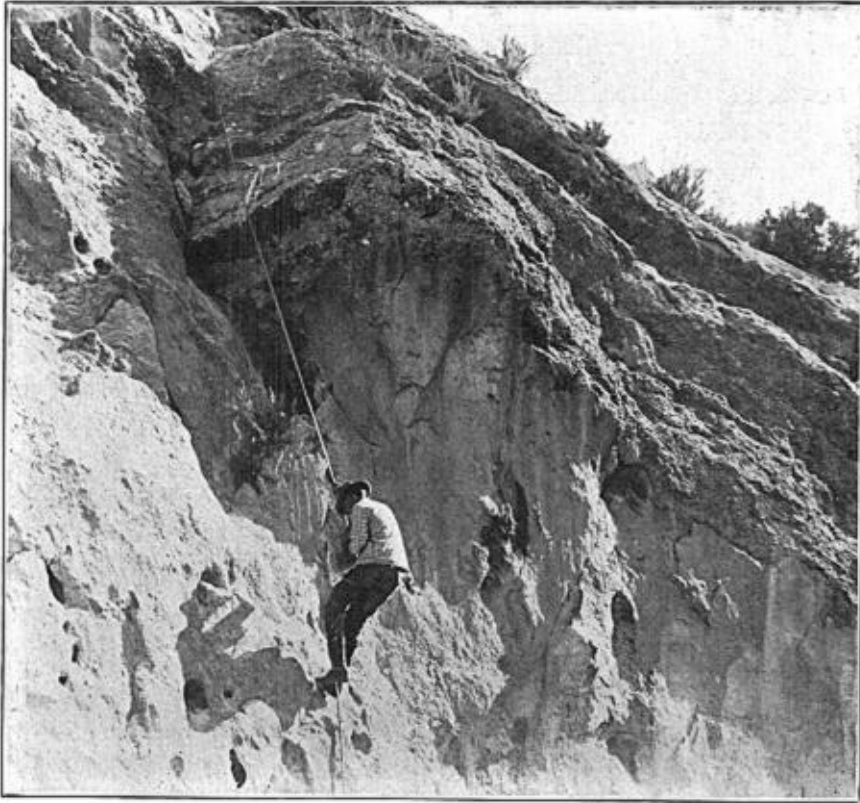


Fig. 14. AN EASY DESCENT; NEST IN CRANNY A LITTLE ABOVE CLIMBER

the very picture of disgust and chagrin. She was mad all through, too disgusted for utterance, and she sat glooming upon the edge of the nest until we drew very near. When she flew she gave vent to the usual number of futile expletives, whereupon the male joined her and gave us a double blessing.

Choice of sites varies from "potholes" and crannies to more pretentious caves or even open ledges. A south exposure is oftenest favored and there seems to be no particular effort on the part of the sitting bird to avoid the glare of the sun: Unseasonable rains, however, do sometimes cause her discomfort, and more rarely, loss.

The first two weeks in April are the golden weeks for Falcon nesting in the cattle country. Evidently many sets are complete by April first, for we found

one far advanced in incubation on the 19th, and another hatching on the 22nd. If robbed early in the season, second sets are almost invariably laid in a new but closely related situation.

Probably none but the few elect would enjoy a rhapsody on color variation in Falcons' eggs, and the non-elect would raise holy hands of horror over the thwarted hopes of these feathered brigands. So be it then, and suffice to say that neither Brooks nor Fuertes can paint a bird with such bewitching grace as Nature herself displays in the lawless tinting of a Falcon's egg. She (*varium et mutabile semper femina*) dips her brush in oorhodeine and she feathers and stipples or twirls and scumbles, or as suddenly ceases, until the hearts of her poor votaries are seized with an exquisite pain—but those dear woes we may not voice.

WILLIAM LEON DAWSON—A BIOGRAPHY

By HARRY S. SWARTH.

WITH PORTRAIT AND TWO PHOTOS

IT IS always of interest to follow the growth of a large and important enterprise, to trace, step by step, the first early attempts by which momentous results are eventually reached, and to study the personality of the man or men behind the undertaking, the backbone of the adventure. The Cooper Ornithological Club has in recent years widened the scope of its activities to an extent probably undreamed of by its founders, being now committed to the active support of several undertakings of unusual interest and moment; and the individuals most directly concerned in each of these different enterprises have naturally become objects of particular interest to their fellow club members.

Among the projects which the Club has pledged itself to support there is probably none of greater general interest than the proposed publication, "The Birds of California," undertaken by William Leon Dawson, and now being so energetically pushed towards completion. Those of us most closely in touch with Mr. Dawson—who have had opportunities of observing the growth and development of the undertaking—have felt that others would be interested to know something of the circumstances leading up to so desirable a consummation as the production of the work as planned, as well as something of the ideas and ideals with which the author approaches his task. In this brief sketch the main incidents of his career are outlined, and an attempt is made to interpret some of his aspirations as to what the forthcoming book should be.

William Leon Dawson, an only child, was born at Leon, Decatur County, Iowa, February 20, 1873. The family soon after removed to western Kansas, where the father, William E. Dawson, a lawyer, helped to organize the county of Rush, becoming its first prosecuting attorney, and later its first superintendent of public instruction. A little later the father entered the ministry, and the family removed, first, in 1879, to Ottawa, Kansas, two years later to northern Illinois. When the son was twelve years of age they moved to Ahtanum, Yakima County, Washington; and when he was fourteen to Seattle, where he entered the State University, at that time little more than a high school.

The boy had already a fondness for natural history, an attribute not so uncommon in youth, but which too frequently dies out through lack of encourage-