

SUBTERRANEAN NESTING BY PRAIRIE FALCONS

by

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Unusual nest site selection in Prairie Falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) has rarely been recorded. Variations from typical nest sites include one instance of tree nesting (Goss 1891) and one attempt within a hole in a lava fault (Pitcher 1977).

On 18 May 1974, we discovered a successful subterranean Prairie Falcon nest site at Rattlesnake Cave in Malheur County, Oregon. This cave, a sink-hole approximately 24 m in diameter, was formed by the collapsed roof of a lava tube. Surrounding terrain was slightly rolling with no significant relief. The nest was placed 3 m below the ground on a 12-m-high vertical wall at the mouth of the cavern.

At the time of discovery the nest contained two downy young which were observed as fledglings on 20 June 1974. To our knowledge this observation constitutes the first report of successful subterranean nesting by Prairie Falcons.

An additional subterranean Prairie Falcon nest site was reported to us (Robert Beasley, Stewart Janes, and Caryn Talbot, pers. comm.). This site, located in Lake County, Oregon consisted of a fissure approximately 804 m long, 1.5 m wide, and 4.5 m deep in an area characterized by otherwise flat terrain. The nest ledge was 1.2 m below ground level. Young fledged from this site in 1972 and 1976.

At both locations, the nesting platform consisted of stick nests probably abandoned by Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) or Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*). The use of stick nests by Prairie Falcons and their somewhat sympatric relationship with Common Ravens was documented (Decker and Bowles 1930, Skinner 1938).

Of the hawks and falcons in western grasslands, Prairie Falcons were shown to be the least versatile in their nest-site selection (Olendorff and Stoddart 1974). However, the occupancy of abandoned quarries by Prairie Falcons (Smith and Murphy 1973) and the reports herein indicate a certain level of adaptability of this species by their willingness to occupy atypical nest sites.

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Figure 1. Prairie Falcon nest site at cave entrance. Arrow shows location of stick nest platform.