

BOOK REVIEW

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Pirate of the Plains: Adventures with Prairie Falcons in the High Desert. By Bruce A. Haak. 1995. Hancock House, Blaine, WA. 208 pp., 74 color photos. ISBN 0-88839-320-2. Paper, \$21.00.—Here is a story about the Zen of doing field research that will motivate the novice and rekindle the enthusiasm of the professional. Bruce Haak takes us back to a carefree time when pursuit of knowledge and desire to explore the unknown were the only motivations necessary to devote one's life to biological research. This book expanded my understanding of prairie falcons (*Falco mexicanus*), but more importantly made me long for camping under clear western skies and waking up with the anticipation of finding a new falcon aerie. Readers will find this book easy to relate to, humorous, laced with conservation ethics, and quick to finish.

The book is organized around Haak's formal and informal research on prairie falcons. It starts with his less-structured wanderings in eastern Oregon as an undergrad at Oregon State University. Rather than spending the late 1960s in Vietnam's rice paddies, Haak chose to further his education. He relates his experiences with the high desert climate, ghostly falcons, and open land during frequent weekend excursions from OSU. This introduction to the land and bird progresses into a more serious survey of falcons mandated by the Endangered Species Act, where Haak presents useful information on the variety of habitats exploited for nesting by prairie falcons in eastern Oregon. We next follow Haak to the lava beds of northern California to study the foraging habits of falcons for his master's thesis. Here, details on the foraging maneuvers, spacing patterns of pairs, trapping techniques, use of falconry to supplement science, and radiotracking are presented. The reader gets an excellent feeling for the high desert environment, which Haak accurately describes as a place where "the wind never stops blowing." Haak touches upon a variety of behavioral observations detailed in his thesis and gives some data

and insights into subadult breeding, parental behavior at the nest (including prey caching), and ranging habits. The remainder of the book recounts observations made during less-structured field projects funded by "back pocket grants." There is a useful comparison of prairie falcon and peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) habits and interesting discussions of potentially symbiotic relationships between common ravens (*Corvus corax*) and prairie falcons. The book ends with a summary of prairie falcon population status across the region and a discussion of the positive and negative effects of humans on this species.

Haak introduces the reader to a variety of important conservation issues in the Columbia River basin. He suggests how overgrazing, coyote control, rangeland "improvement," private use of public lands, agriculture, and water diversion have shaped the land and influenced its natural inhabitants. He offers strong opinions on many of these forces that most biologists would be quick to agree with. A few of my favorites are his description of cheat grass (*Bromus tectorum*) as the "most useless plant" to invade the area, and coyote control as simply a "wasted effort." The reader familiar with this ecosystem and its abuse at the hands of humans will applaud Haak's candor during these wanderings. The reader that has not spent time in the Columbia basin will finish the book with an excellent introduction to the conflicts between human settlement and biodiversity in this harsh environment.

I found this book to be a delightful story of a magnificent land and its changes over the past three decades. The only frustration I had was over the lack of scientific citations or footnotes. Many scientific studies are referred to, but the reader has no way of knowing which articles are being discussed. There also was little to no quantification of Haak's data. Such a scientific assessment of prairie falcons was not the intent of this book, but a bit of scholarship could have been included without detracting from the book's style. Lack of scholarship is especially disappointing because these data are

available only in Haak's thesis, none of which has been published in the general literature. In summary, this is not a technical account of prairie falcon behavioral ecology, but it belongs on the shelves of raptor field biologists and should be rec-

ommended reading for young researchers intent on exploring the mysteries of vertebrate biology.—

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