

## CAPTURE OF A PRAIRIE CHICKEN BY A PRAIRIE FALCON

BY KARL F. JACOBS

ON FEBRUARY 12, 1957, while watching a drop-net set for Greater Prairie Chickens (*Tympanuchus cupido*) in a 20-acre alfalfa field 2 miles north and 1 mile east of Grainola, Osage County, Oklahoma, Robert Davis and I witnessed from a pickup truck the unsuccessful attempt of a prairie chicken to escape from a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*).

At 5:15 that afternoon we happened to see two prairie chickens just above the horizon, both of them flying erratically. With the help of a 10-power binocular we perceived that they were fleeing from a Prairie Falcon about 200 yards back of them. Within an incredibly short time the falcon had closed the distance between itself and the chickens to a mere 20 yards. Now the chickens split up and flew at right angles to their original flight-line. The falcon turned right, into the sun, in hot pursuit of one bird. The chicken, beating its wings constantly and rapidly, decreased altitude from about 75 feet to about 10 feet. At this point—after we had watched the chicken and its pursuer fly about 400 yards—the two birds disappeared behind a rise in the terrain.

We drove the truck to within about 150 yards of the point at which we believed the falcon must have overtaken its prey. From this new position we could see the falcon on the ground, tearing at something with its beak.

Suddenly a gray adult male Marsh Hawk (*Circus hudsonius*) flew in and stooped at the falcon. The falcon ducked its head and threw up a wing in defense. The hawk flew off a way, turned, came back, and slashed at the falcon with open talons. The falcon flew up this time, battling first with the gray hawk, then with a brown Marsh Hawk that came in. The falcon attacked from below—with beak open and talons apparently clenched. Both Marsh Hawks kept their talons open most of the time while fighting. Two more brown Marsh Hawks came by to investigate, but they did not enter the fracas. Three times the falcon returned to the ground to guard its prey; but each time it alighted, one of the hawks came slashing at it and it was obliged to resume fighting in the air.

After about ten minutes of battling, the falcon flew off fifty yards or so, turned, and with a tremendous burst of speed came at the gray Marsh Hawk. The hawk attempted to outmaneuver its assailant, but was unsuccessful. The falcon dealt a sharp blow with clenched fist that threw the hawk off balance. The hawk made a last show of resistance by attempting to wing-whip the falcon. This having failed, the two hawks acknowledged their inability to dispossess the falcon; they flew off over the prairie, presumably in search of a more easily obtainable meal.

We drove to the spot at which the falcon had been tearing at its kill. There lay a hen prairie chicken. A three-inch patch of skin had been torn from the breast. We found no other external evidence of recent injury, but blood was flowing from the nostrils. On opening the body, which was still quite warm, we found blood clots in the heart and lungs. The heart appeared to have been bruised, but we found no puncture marks anywhere on the body and no recent wounds of any sort aside from the torn skin just mentioned.

There was, however, evidence of an old wound on the right side of the chest. Here a scab, which showed no sign of infection, covered a skin-area about half an inch wide and three-quarters of an inch long. Otherwise the chicken was in good flesh and fairly fat.

Although I have on many occasions observed a Marsh Hawk pursuing a prairie chicken, I have never seen one actually injure a chicken. On several occasions, too, I have watched a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) chasing a prairie chicken. A healthy Greater Prairie Chicken appears to be perfectly capable of outflying either a Marsh Hawk or a Golden Eagle. The chickens obviously fear a Prairie Falcon, however, for the appearance of a falcon near by completely panics them.

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## BIRDS TO BE LOOKED FOR IN THE BLACK MESA COUNTRY

BY JOHN S. WESKE

THE BLACK MESA country, in the far northwestern corner of Oklahoma, has received considerable attention from ornithologists. No bird student now lives in this part of the state, however. The nearest active observers, Adolph J. Krehbiel and his associates, live in Clayton, New Mexico, 40 miles south-southwest of Kenton, Oklahoma, and 11 miles from the nearest corner of the Oklahoma Panhandle. Mr. Krehbiel has kept records on the birds of Clayton for more than two decades. Several years ago he published a four-page check-list for the area. Although this list is not based on observations made in Oklahoma, it contains information of considerable interest and value to Oklahoma bird students.

To be noted is the fact that there are pronounced differences in habitat between Clayton and Kenton. The plains surrounding Clayton are largely treeless; rough country is confined to creek valleys, and there is no extensive pinyon-juniper woodland comparable to that found near Kenton. On the other hand, trees and gardens in Clayton provide a habitat not found in Oklahoma anywhere west of Boise City.