

III. *Tulsa — The final episode*

BY MARK WALLER

In early December 1984, I received an injured immature male Peregrine Falcon from Steve Sherrod of Bartlesville, along with permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to fly it until it fully recovered from an injury sustained about two months before. If all went well, the falcon was to be released in April 1985, a date when others of its kind would be migrating through Oklahoma to their boreal breeding grounds.

The bird walked with a noticeable limp in its left leg, and its coordination seemed slightly impaired. In addition, one wing was held approximately a half inch lower at the shoulder than the other. He seemed fairly healthy otherwise and displayed normal plumage and a hearty appetite. After several weeks, however, parasites appeared in his droppings. These were examined, diagnosed as tapeworms, and treated.

For exercise, I allowed him to chase birds from my flock of homing pigeons. He always pursued them, but he was not nearly as successful at footing this shifty quarry as other falcons I had flown. Typically, he flew about in tight circles at a pitch of 150 to 350 feet, waiting to be served pigeons. On six or eight occasions, he checked off and pursued large flocks of blackbirds, but he never caught one. Concluding such a flight, he usually returned, expecting a pigeon. After several weeks of this activity, his condition appeared to be considerably improved, but I continued flying him, waiting only for April.

As I was flying the falcon on the late afternoon of 3 April 1985, he suddenly checked off toward the northwest, randomly pursuing several flocks of blackbirds. I watched him through binoculars until he finally disappeared below a hilltop. I continued swinging the lure, for he had always come back from these forays. After about 15 minutes had passed, I became concerned. Earlier, I had affixed a transmitter to his tail for such emergencies, so I decided to try to locate him by radio tracking his signal. It was strong and steady, but by the time I was able to pinpoint his location, the sun had set, and he was unable to see me. I knew within several meters where he had gone to roost, but the darkness forced me to wait until the next morning to pick him up.

At about 0500 the next day, I arrived at the site, but the telemetry signal indicated that the falcon was now across the road from the spot where I felt certain he had spent the night. Following this signal, I was led to a large creek bottom a half mile away. The signal had become much stronger; the falcon was very close. I continued into the creek timber and found a large bulky nest containing two young Great-horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*). One of the old birds was perched on a snag nearby. It was then that I began to notice falcon feathers scattered randomly about on the ground approximately 20 meters from the owl's nest. About four feet up, hanging from a small tree, hung one of the falcon's central tail feathers, the transmitter still attached. I continued searching for additional remains, but found only a few more contour feathers and

five more rectrices. The falcon had apparently been caught on its roost, killed and plucked by one of the adult owls, then fed to its young.

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GENERAL NOTES

Harris' Hawks in Oklahoma during fall and winter, 1986-87.—Harris' Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) is a resident of the New World Tropics northward to southern parts of Arizona and New Mexico east to central Texas; it is reported as "casual in northern and eastern Texas (and) Oklahoma . . ." (AOU Checklist of North American birds, 1983, p. 113). It spends at least some winters along the Red River of extreme southwestern Oklahoma in the vicinity of Eldorado, in Jackson County (see Ault, J. W., 1975, Bull. Oklahoma Orn. Soc. 8:34-36), and there are published sight records for Comanche, Oklahoma, and Murray counties (Sutton, G. M. [1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman).

On 15 November 1986 at about 1030, Jay K. Banta, a biologist at the Fort Sill Military Reservation, discovered a Harris' Hawk on the post's East Range in Comanche County, southwest Oklahoma. The day was mild and calm, if somewhat overcast, and the temperature rose to around 55°F (13°C). At the time, Banta had been driving westward along Fort Sill's South Boundary Road, near its intersection with Northeast 45th Street, a north-south thoroughfare within the eastern city limits of Lawton. The dark hawk was perched atop a utility pole and was rather tame, allowing Banta to approach to within about 15 yards (13 m) before lifting up and drifting southward out of view.

During the 20 or so seconds accorded him for scrutinizing the hawk, Banta made several important observations. First, though his initial impression was that the bird was a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), it was simply too black for that species. Second, the perch was unlikely for a harrier: of hundreds he had watched over the years, not one had Banta ever noticed resting on top of a telephone pole. Third, the bird's rather short tail was shaped more like a *buteo*'s than a harrier's. Blackish for most of its length, it was not narrowly banded, as on a harrier. Yet the tail's most glaringly obvious feature was its pure white base that contrasted so sharply with the blackness of the body plumage. Finally, near the bend of the wings, Banta noticed a rather extensive area of rich chestnut. This combination of field marks clinched his identification: the puzzling bird was most certainly a Harris' Hawk.

Less than 15 minutes later, another Fort Sill biologist, Kevin McCurdy, happened by and also noticed this unusual raptor in the same area. More surprisingly still was the later revelation that yet another person had encountered the bird here at least a week earlier! That observer, C. Brian Aldrich from Lawton, was an apprentice falconer.

At about 1640 that same day, Sam J. Orr, a local bird bander, and his friend Wally Breden, captured the hawk using a bal-chatri trap. Orr determined that the bird was an adult female in partial molt. The outer rectrices, still sheathed at their bases, were only about two and one-half inches long. The crop was empty, and the hawk readily accepted a mouse offered by its captors.