FALCONS AND WOODLAND HAWKS IN ALBERTA

Peregrine Falcon
Falco pergrinus

The peregrine is a large falcon (45 cm or 18 in. long) identified by a heavy black moustache patch and a dark crown, hindneck and face.

The back, wings and tail are grey-blue. The throat and upper breast are a creamy white, changing to a pink buff color with black markings on the lower breast and abdomen.
In Alberta, peregrines have been known to nest in most life zones having suitable nest sites in northern, central and western portions of the province. *Populations have recently recovered somewhat from near-extinct levels.*
This falcon is probably the fastest and most skillful flier of all birds. It takes birds up to the size of pigeons on the wing. The peregrine in a dive may attain speeds over 300 km/h (190 m.p.h.).

Merlin Falco columbarius

A fairly common summer resident, the merlin is a small (30 cm or 12 in. long), dull brown or bluish falcon that can be readily identified by its long pointed wings, tail with strong black bars, and the absence of facial markings.
Adult males are powder blue, and females are brown on the crown, back and wings.
In Alberta they are found in wooded courses in the south, and mixedwood areas near water in the north. Merlins are fairly tolerant of humans and many will nest close to cities or farms. However, if the nest is approached too closely, the nesting pair will defend it vigorously. Prey is killed in the air in the same manner as by the larger peregrine falcon. Small birds are caught and often eaten on the wing.

Gyrfalcon Falco rusticolus

The gyrfalcon is the largest member of the falcon family (56 cm or 22 in. long). It visits Alberta only as a rare wanderer during the winter months.
Several color variations from white to near black exist but most are classified simply as light or dark phases. Light gyrfalcons may be pure white, or white with black spotting on the crown, back and sides, and black bars on the primaries (longest wing feathers). Dark gyrfalcons may be black, or more commonly an ash-grey with white streaking on the undersides.

In the summer it inhabits Arctic and subarctic regions near cliffs or mountains, either inland or along the coast line.
Winter range includes open or lightly wooded terrain from the breeding grounds irregularly to southern Canada. In Alberta, voles, rabbits and game birds are preyed upon during the winter.

Sharp-Shinned Hawk
Accipiter stratus

The sharp-shinned hawk is recognized in the field by its small size (30 cm, 12 in. long), a notched or square tail, and rust-colored, barred underparts. The back and crown are a dark slate grey, and four dark bands stripe the tail. The sharp-shinned hawk may be confused with the merlin or a young Cooper's hawk. The rounded wings and lack of a toothed beak distinguish it from the former, and the square tail from the latter species.
In Alberta this species is usually found in the montane, foothill, mixedwood and parkland zones. Like most accipiters, the sharp-shinned hawk seldom soars, except during migration. During hunting flights it flies low over trees in search of prey. Small birds and insects constitute the bulk of its diet.

Cooper's Hawk
Accipiter cooperii

The rounded tail tip of the Cooper's hawk distinguishes it from the sharp-shinned hawk. Like the sharp-shinned hawk, the Cooper's hawk also has a dark, blue-grey crown and back, and

underparts are heavily barred with brown. lt is about 45 cm (18 in.) long.

In Alberta, foothill and parkland zones host a small number of nesting pairs. A fast and powerful predator, the Cooper's hawk watches from the edges of clearings or flies low over treetops in search of prey. The long tail provides maneuverability among branches, and the short, strong wing beats give it speed. Prey consists almost totally of small birds.

American Kestrel
Falco sparverius

A small falcon (28 cm, or 11 in. long), the male of this species is very distinctive with reddish brown on the tail and back and blue on the head and wings. The female is less conspicuous, being generally reddish brown banded in black. The kestrel may be confused with the merlin in the field, but the bright browns and contrasting face colors of the kestrel help identify it.

It is commonly observed on telephone lines where it rests between hunting forays into nearby ditches.

Kestrels also hunt in open country such as fields, meadows and prairies. The American kestrel eats grasshoppers, caterpillars, dragonflies, and other large insects in the summer and early fall. In winter, it relies on mice and small birds. When not perching on a telephone pole, or fence post, a kestrel may be seen hovering over one spot in search of prey.

Goshawk Accipiter gentilis

The goshawk, one of the largest hawks (58 cm, or 23 in. long), is most often found in the montane, foothill, mixedwood and parkland zones associated with heavily wooded areas. It is distinguished by its size, grey-blue underparts, and white eye stripe. The upper parts are a dark slate blue and the crown is black. The encroachment of civilization has forced the goshawk into more remote parts of Alberta. Goshawks are efficient forest predators, feeding on game birds, rabbits and various rodents. Near farms they often take poultry and can be a persistent problem.

Prairie Falcon Falco mexicanus

The prairie falcon is a light brown falcon most commonly found on the plains, and only occasionally in wooded areas. It is as large as the peregrine but the plumage is much paler. The adult prairie falcon is light brownish grey above and white or cream streaked with dark brown on the underside. From below, it is most easily distinguished by the long, dark feathers under each wing base.

Prime prairie falcon habitat is the typically dry open country of the west in the vicinity of cliffs, coulees, canyons, badlands or rock outcroppings. It is found in the prairie and foothill zones of southern Alberta.

Prey includes rodents, young rabbits and birds.

Help protect our wildlife and their habitat. When hiking or camping, please take all your trash with you when you leave the area.