





201-01-1990

Rare Species Report: Prairie Falcon, *Falco mexicanus*

Sighting Dates: 22 October 1990, 4:40 PM  
23 October 1990, 4:40 PM  
24 October 1990, 12:10 PM

Location: Along Mud Level Road (T305) in Southampton Township, Cumberland County. Approximately 4 miles northeast of Shippensburg.

Habitat: Mostly flat open farmland. Immediate area consisted of freshly cut corn fields and standing corn fields.

Sighting Conditions:

10-24: partly sunny, good light, observed for 35 minutes from as close as 30 - 35 feet.  
Used 10 X 50 Tasco binoculars, 15-60 X 60 Bushnel scope.  
Photos were taken from about 80 yards away.

Description: See enclosed sketch which was made from memory immediately after the sighting on October 24. The top of the head was light brown. A distinct white supercilliary line separated the crown from the rest of the head. The area between the eye and darker ear patch was also white. The eye itself was dark and there was a faint brown malar stripe extending downward from the eye. The cere was yellow while the bill was gray. The mantle, flight feathers and tail were all the same light shade of brown. The breast was streaked with light brown. The feet and legs were yellow, the undertail coverts white. When perched the tail extended well beyond the folded wings. In flight the underwing coverts and axillaries displayed a distinct dark patch.

Observations: On October 22, I first observed this bird perched in a lone tree above a farm field just northeast of the intersection of Mud Level and Britton Roads. The tree was about 150 yards from the road. It was raining at this time and the lighting was quite poor. When I looked at the bird through binoculars, it seemed small for a Red-tailed hawk, which are seen regularly in this habitat, but because of the weather and lighting conditions I was not able to make any determination as to its identity.

The next evening I saw the bird again in the same tree. It was not raining, but the sky was overcast, and the lighting was just slightly better. I was able to observe it for 5 to 10 minutes on this occasion. The head appeared light in color and at one point it spread its wings and I could see that the back, rump and tail were all one shade of brown. I knew at that point that it was not a Red-tail - an immature Red-tail usually has some white spotting on its back and white on its rump. After a few minutes the bird took flight and swooped down and away from me crossing a recently

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plowed field that was full of killdeer, flushing the killdeer into flight. As soon as the bird was airborne, I saw the distinct shape of pointed falcon wings and knew I was onto something interesting. Being an avid hawk watcher, I of course knew that Peregrine Falcons were in the midst of their migration and so I thought that what I was seeing was probably an immature Peregrine.

The falcon flew across the field and I lost sight of it as it flew behind a barn on the other side of Britton Road. I jumped in my pickup and drove around to where I thought it may have gone. I spotted it behind the barn perched in a tree. It was being harrassed by an American Kestrel, which was swooping back and forth at the larger falcon, much like a crow harrassing an owl or a hawk. Wanting to get closer to the unidentified falcon, I drove into the farm lane to get permission to walk out to the field behind the barn. There was no answer when I knocked at the house and by the time I came back down from the porch the falcon had flown. I could not locate it again that evening.

The next day, Wednesday the 24th, I went out on my lunch hour to see if I could find the falcon again. I did locate it about a mile east of where it had been previously. It was perched in a lone tree in a freshly cut corn field. I approached slowly, observing with my binoculars and scope and taking pictures with a 300mm zoom lense and 2x converter. I exposed my last frame of film when I was about 70 - 80 yards from the tree. By this time, I was able to see the bird clearly and identify it as a Prairie Falcon. The white supercilliary line was very distinct and I could see the white area between the eye and dark ear patch which Clark and Wheeler indicate is diagnostic.

I continued to approach the bird observing with just my binoculars. I had birded in Colorado earlier this year and had observed Prairie Falcons on three separate occasions. Each time, the identifying characteristic we used out there was the dark area in the axiliaries and underwing coverts. I was confident with my identification of the bird in question, but since I was familiar with the dark underwing, I wanted to press this bird into flight to get a look at this feature. To my surprise, the bird did not fly. It allowed me to approach to the base of the tree. I was able to observe the Prairie Falcon from the front and rear. It was about 30 - 35 feet up in the tree and I did not see any bands or jesses on its legs.

After a minute or two the bird got nervous enough to fly away. Even then it only flew about 100 yards working back and forth very close to the ground until it came to rest on a small knoll. As it swooped down from the tree, the dark area under the wing was seen clearly. Having satisfied my curiosity and needing to get back to the office, I left the falcon sitting on that knoll.

A search was conducted the following day by several people including myself, but the Prairie Falcon was not seen again.

Additional Comments: As soon as I was able to identify this

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bird as a Prairie Falcon, I realized that there was a good chance that it was an escaped falconry bird. Knowing that this sighting would probably not be accepted unless we could rule out falconry, I called a falconer with whom I was acquainted. He told me that although there are several falconers in the Pennsylvania/Maryland area who fly Prairie Falcons, he did not know of any that had been lost recently, but that they do get away from time to time.

As I thought about the weather over the previous week and then looked back over the weather maps from the 16th through the 19th of October, I began to realize that it was also a good possibility that this bird could have been blown in from the mid-west on the tails of a very strong cold front that blew across the country during those few days.

I have included a copy of the weather maps from those days along with this report. Also, (from data recorded at a hawk watching location on the South Mountain) the winds averaged from 25 to 30 miles per hour from the south on the 18th as the front approached our area and then 20 to 25 miles per hour west-northwest on the 19th after the front had passed.

Sighting and Report by:

Don Henise  
763 Green Spring Road  
Newville, PA 17241

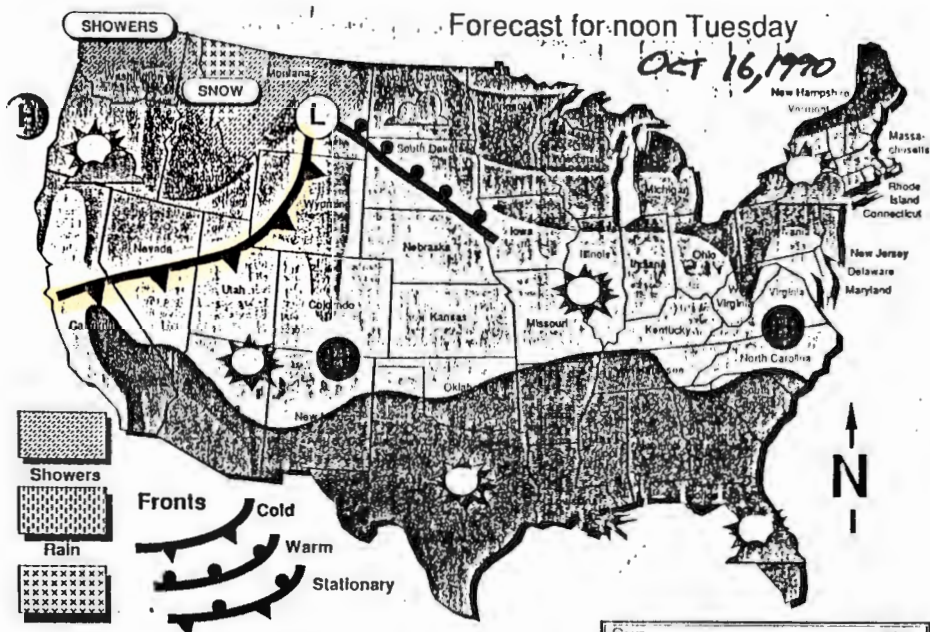
Home: 717-776-6550

Work: 717-532-1421

Don Henise

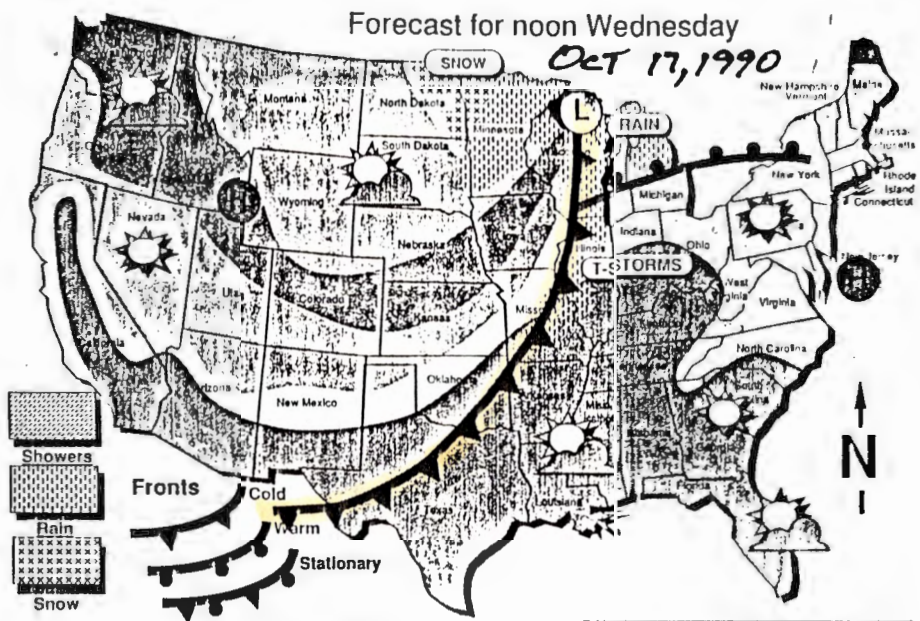
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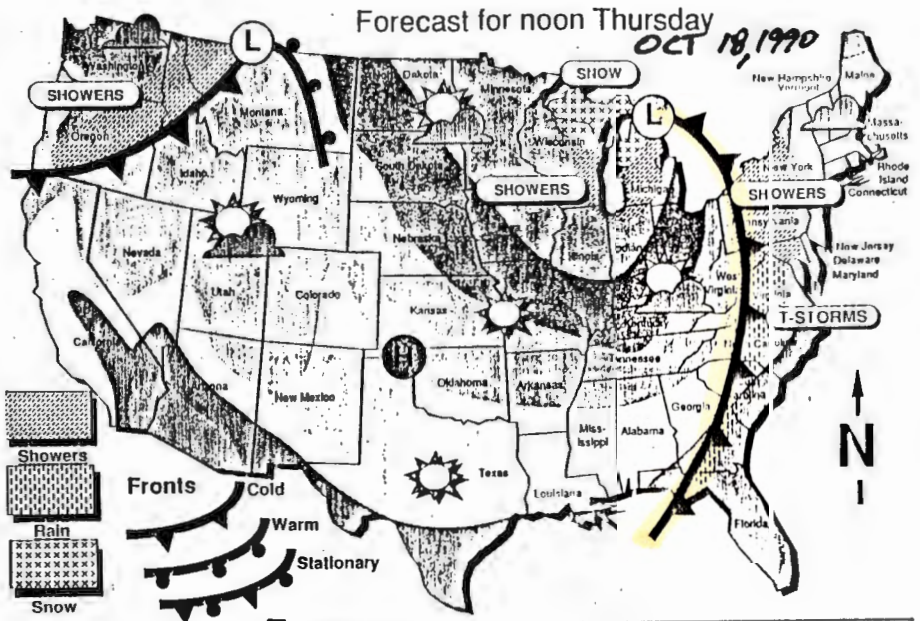
**ELSEWHERE**  
 The outlook — Tonight...Mostly clear. Lows in the mid 40s. Northwest winds 5 to 10 mph.  
 Tuesday...Mostly sunny. Highs around 70.

Sun	Sunset Monday	6:28 p.m.	
	Sunrise Tuesday	7:18 a.m.	
Precipitation	Rain	Snow	
	24 hours ending midnight	none	none



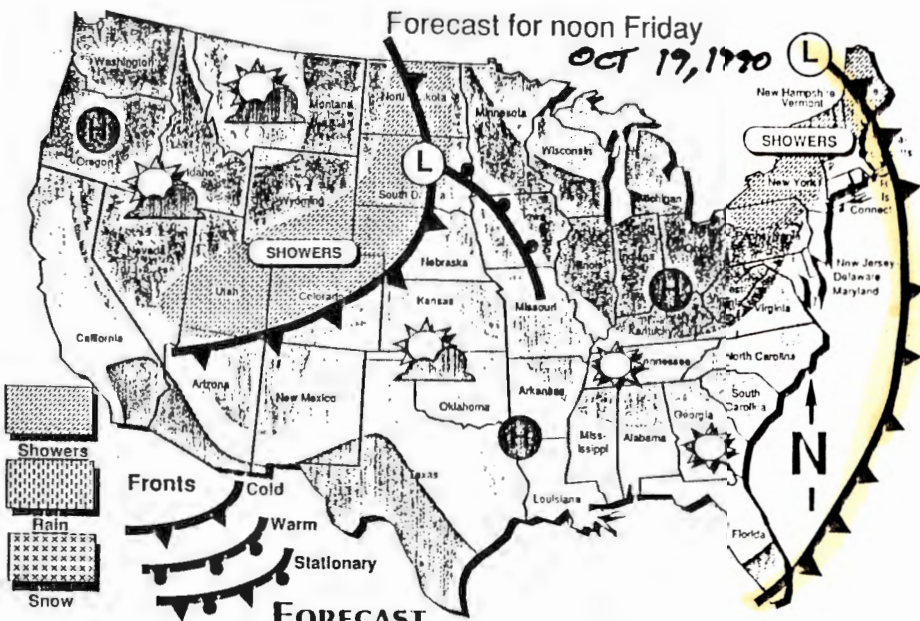
**ELSEWHERE**  
 The outlook — Mostly clear tonight. Lows in the low to mid 40s. Mostly sunny Wednesday. Highs in the low to mid-70s.

Sun	Sunset Tuesday	6:27 p.m.	
	Sunrise Wednesday	7:19 a.m.	
Precipitation	Rain	Snow	
	24 hours ending midnight	none	none



**ELSEWHERE**  
 The outlook — Partly cloudy tonight. Lows in the mid-50s. Mostly cloudy and windy Thursday with a 70 percent chance of showers. Highs near 70.

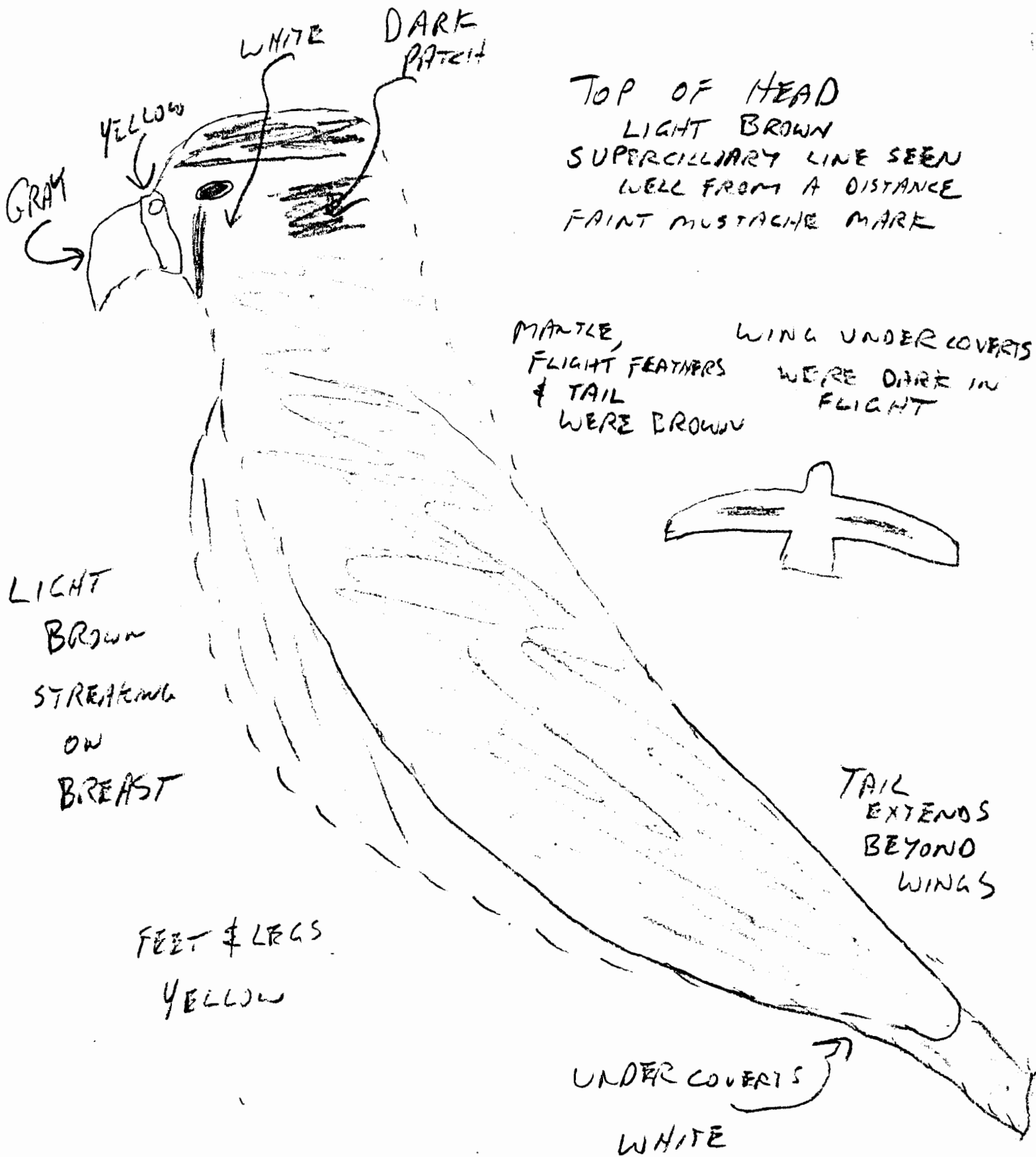
Sun	Sunset Wednesday	6:25 p.m.	
	Sunrise Thursday	7:21 a.m.	
Precipitation	Rain	Snow	
	24 hours ending midnight	none	none



**ELSEWHERE**  
 The outlook — Mostly cloudy and windy tonight with a 10 percent chance of showers. Lows 45 to 50. Partly sunny and windy Friday. Highs near 60.

Sun	Sunset Thursday	6:24 p.m.	
	Sunrise Friday	7:22 a.m.	
Precipitation	Rain	Snow	
	24 hours ending midnight	none	none

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TOP OF HEAD  
 LIGHT BROWN  
 SUPERCILIARY LINE SEEN  
 WELL FROM A DISTANCE  
 FAINT MUSTACHE MARK

MANTLE,  
 FLIGHT FEATHERS  
 & TAIL  
 WERE BROWN

WING UNDER COVERTS  
 WERE DARK IN  
 FLIGHT

LIGHT  
 BROWN  
 STREAKING  
 ON  
 BREAST

FEET & LEGS  
 YELLOW

UNDER COVERTS  
 WHITE

TAIL  
 EXTENDS  
 BEYOND  
 WINGS

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round # of**

Species: **Prairie Falcon**

Date of Sighting: **October 22-24, 1990**

Observer(s): **Don Henise**

Date of Submission: **1990 Cumberland**

Submitted by: **Don Henise**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater	X						
B. Haas					X		
F. Haas					X		
R. Leberman					X		
G. McWilliams	X						
S. Santner					X		
P. Schwalbe	X						
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3</b>				<b>4</b>		
<b>DECISION</b>					X		

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

*BW Haas*

Date:

*3-24-91*