





During their spring migration through central Alberta, Peregrines commonly make a stopover on the open pastures around Beaverhills Lake. Arriving in late afternoon or early evening, they tend to seek a perch on prominent points and often select a fence post standing in water. In order to find out where these falcons roost for the night, I watched a number of them until it became too dark to see. To my surprise, at dusk some Peregrines took off to hunt ducks, which at that time of day leave the lake and head inland. Flying low over the dark fields, the falcons swooped upward at prey outlined against the still luminous sky. I suspect that night hunting also is a way of escaping the attention of scavengers intent on robbing falcons of their catch.



If attacked by a Peregrine, flying ducks habitually save themselves by plunging into the nearest water. The immature falcon in the painting at left, in hot pursuit of four Northern Pintails (*Anas acuta*), is not likely to catch one of them, because the ducks are already over water and descending. By contrast, as illustrated in the painting above, this falcon is coming in low from the lake and in a good position to overtake its prey over land, grabbing it in midair or after it drops down onto marshy ground. Migrating Peregrines consume only the neck and part of the breast of a duck and leave the remains to scavengers. Females are capable of warding off harriers and buzzards, but male Peregrines – one third smaller than the females – commonly lose their ducks.





Sandpipers select open feeding grounds that allow a wide field of view, and they crowd together according to the principle that there is safety in numbers and that two pairs of eyes see more than one pair. Falcons that hunt shorebirds commonly attack by stealth, using vegetation to stay out of sight until the very last moment when the prey flushes in alarm. At Alberta's Beaverhills Lake, Merlins used stealth methods in 72% of 354 observed attacks, and Peregrines in 74% of 647 attacks. Merlins hunting small shorebirds succeeded in 12.5% of attacks, and Peregrines in 8.8%, but the difference was not statistically significant. If surprise attacks failed, both falcons approached the shorebirds openly and might pursue a selected target high into the sky, making repeated swoops until the prey is either caught or escapes.

The painting at left shows a Merlin in a typical stealth attack on Least Sandpipers (*Calidris minutilla*). Above, an adult Peregrine about to take a Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) by surprise.





Along a 15-km stretch of Alberta's Red Deer River that I named the Valley of the Falcons, I found three or four breeding pairs each of Peregrines and Prairie Falcons in 1960. By the end of that decade, the former had become extirpated, while the latter continued to produce young. The causes of the Peregrine's demise were no doubt related to pesticide pollution and direct human interference, but I wondered whether there were other factors involved, namely interspecific competition for nest sites and habitat change resulting in a declining prey base for the Peregrine. An opportunity to test this hypothesis arrived in the 1990s, when Canadian government agencies released about 200 captive-raised Peregrines at hack-sites along the river. After an initial success, resulting in the return of the Peregrine as a local breeding bird, the species dwindled again to only one nest in 2005–2008. In an inverse relationship, the Prairie Falcons increased. The painting at left depicts a pair of prairies soaring over their traditional eyrie cliffs.

Above, a Golden Eagle in power glide along a foothills slope. A versatile hunter, it mainly captures ground squirrels and rabbits, but it is quite capable of seizing ducks in flight if they flush just ahead. It is also a habitual klepto-parasite, robbing smaller raptors of their catch, but this is a trait shared by all wild carnivores.



The American Bald Eagle is a grand example of the carnivore motto: *why exert yourself if you can eat for free*. However, the universal principle is energy efficiency. Capable of killing waterfowl up to the size of swans, the Bald Eagle is usually content to feed on fish or even carrion. It is also quick to take advantage of smaller raptors. On the Pacific coast of western Canada, the ubiquitous presence of Bald Eagles forces wintering Peregrines to stop hunting ducks, and to concentrate on sandpipers that can be carried off at the approach of klepto-parasites. In central Alberta, eagles keep watch at stretches of river – downstream from big cities – that stay unfrozen and where Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) overwinter. Although they manage to catch a few ducks themselves, the eagles wait for Gyrfalcons to bring down Mallards that fly inland to feed on grain.

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