

Prairie Falcon *Falco mexicanus*

The Prairie Falcon is one of San Diego County’s scarcest breeding birds, with a population of 20 to 30 pairs. The birds nest on ledges on cliffs or bluffs and forage in open desert or grassland. They are somewhat more numerous in winter, enough so to be considered merely uncommon at that season in San Diego County’s largest grassland, Warner Valley. In spite of nesting birds’ sensitivity to human disturbance the San Diego County population seems stable.

Breeding distribution: The Prairie Falcon has an inland distribution; all known or likely current nest sites are at least 23 miles from the coast. Five to ten pairs are in rugged areas of the coastal slope, down to an elevation of about 1000 feet. Six to ten pairs are on the steep east slope of the county’s mountains, and about seven pairs are in rocky hills or badlands within the Anza–Borrego Desert. Most nest sites are near grassland or desert plains where the birds forage, but some on cliffs on the coastal slope are surrounded by chaparral, sage scrub, and oak woodland for up to 2 miles in all directions. Clearly, the birds often range farther than this from their nests. In Idaho, Marzluff et al. (1997) found that Prairie Falcons commonly foraged over 4 miles from their nests and sometimes as far as 24 miles. Such long commutes are likely in areas like the badlands of the Anza–Borrego Desert where the density of prey is low, especially in dry years.

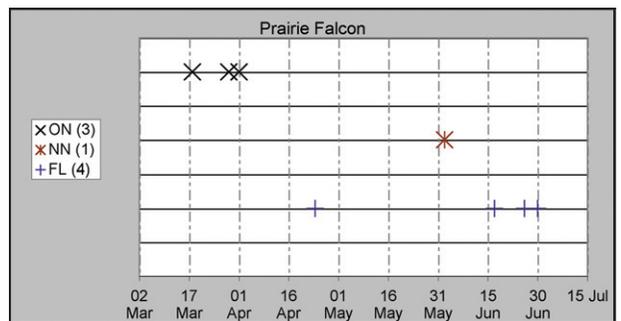
Nesting: Prairie Falcons build no nest, typically laying their eggs directly on ledges, sometimes in caves. Both rocky cliffs and eroded earthen bluffs in desert badlands offer nest sites. Sometimes the birds reuse the stick nests of hawks or ravens; R. Thériault noted one such nest in the Anza–Borrego Desert 29 March 2001, and the only



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

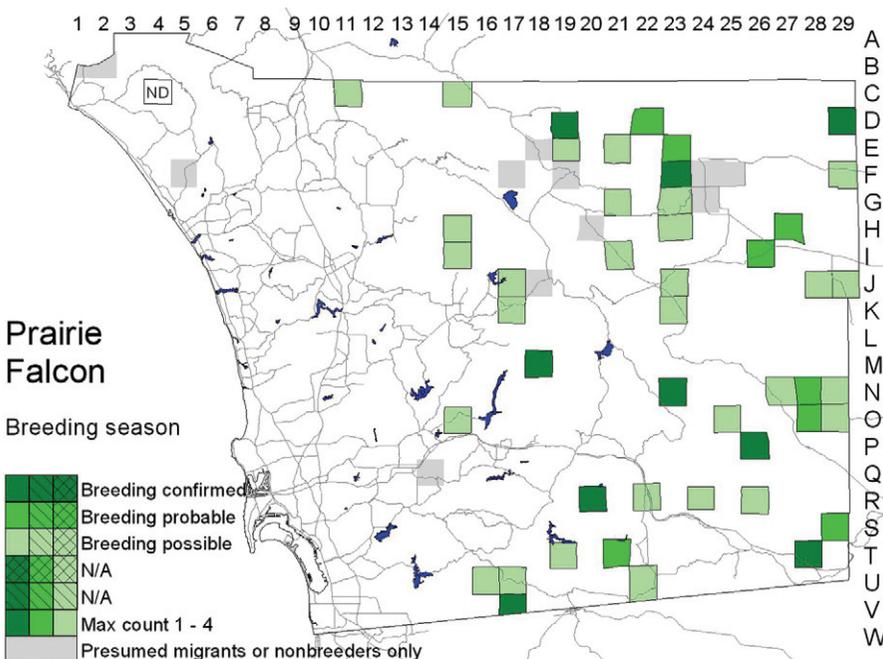
egg set collected in the county was from an old raven nest. Of seven nests checked by D. Bittner in the Anza–Borrego Desert in 2004, three were in rock cavities, two were in old raven nests, and two were in old eagle nests.

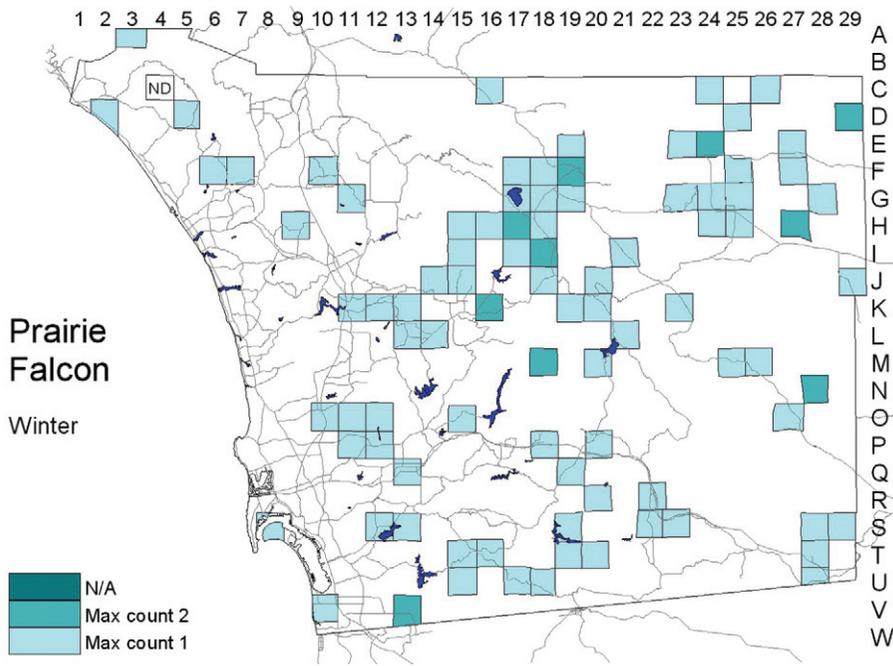
Data on the Prairie Falcon’s nesting schedule in San Diego County are still minimal. The one egg set was collected 4 April 1926 (WFVZ 63160). A fledgling in the Anza–Borrego Desert 24 April (R. Thériault) suggests egg laying as early as mid February, while large chicks



still in a nest on the coastal slope 2 June (P. P. Beck) suggest egg laying as late as late April or early May.

Migration: The Prairie Falcon moves more in response to changes in the availability of prey than in a conventional migration. In summer, the falcons vacate deserts where rodents estivate (Steenhof 1998), so this pattern could be expected in the Anza–Borrego Desert. The state park database has only two records for August (two in Hawk Canyon, H27, 12 August 1991, J. Zemon; one at View of Badlands, N27, 16 August 1991, R. Thériault) and none for September. Along the coast, the Prairie Falcon occurs mainly from September to February, though it shows up





Conservation: The Prairie Falcon did not undergo the same DDT-induced population crash as some other birds of prey, and its numbers in California as a whole remained approximately stable through the 1970s (Boyce et al. 1986). The numbers we observed in San Diego County 1997–2001 are about the same as those reported from San Diego County in the 1970s as well (Unitt 1984). Evidently the breeding population here was always small. Records before 1997 list several sites where we did not see the falcon during the atlas period, but most of these are not far from current sites, which could be alternates. At least one former nest site on the fringe of the city of San Diego has apparently been abandoned,

exceptionally at other times (e.g., one in Cristianitos Canyon, B2, 17 May 1998, L. Allen).

Winter: In winter the Prairie Falcon is encountered more often than in the breeding season, especially in the Borrego Valley and in the larger grasslands of the coastal slope: Warner, Santa Ysabel, and Santa Maria valleys and Otay Mesa. From 1997 to 2002, however, we never noted more than two per atlas square per day. The maximum reported on any of San Diego County’s six Christmas bird counts was 10 on the Lake Henshaw count 19 December 1988; the Lake Henshaw count is the only one of the six in the county that has yielded more than five. Though more frequent along the coast in winter than in spring or summer, the Prairie Falcon tends to keep inland in winter as well; the Tijuana River valley is the only coastal location where the species occurs in winter with any regularity.

however: Fortuna Mountain (P11), active at least in 1980 (Calif. Dept. Fish and Game data).

The greatest threat to the Prairie Falcon currently is probably human disturbance near nest sites. Although in other parts of its range the falcon nests occasionally where there is some level of human activity, in San Diego County it may find it difficult to habituate to the intermittent disturbance of people hiking, driving vehicles, and especially climbing rocks near nest sites on weekends and holidays. Boyce et al. (1986) found that fledging success in areas of the Mojave Desert with heavy recreational use was less than in more secluded areas. Other threats are loss of grassland on the coastal slope to urbanization and a trend toward a drier climate, which could leave parts of the Anza–Borrego Desert with so little prey that the falcons can no longer nest successfully.