

Short Notes

Predation on a Western Burrowing Owl by an apparent Prairie Falcon

– We observed a raptor capture and kill a Western Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*), a California species of special concern (California Department of Fish and Game 1992), on the morning of 29 September 2004 while conducting a Burrowing Owl survey in a vernal pool system near Goshen, Tulare County, California. The identification of the raptor as a likely Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) was based on observations of this species at the site by a qualified ornithologist (J. Seay, pers. comm.) a few days prior to the take of the owl. We observed the raptor to have a pale brown dorsal surface and creamy white with heavy spotting under the wings. There was no distinctive helmet, as on the Peregrine Falcon (*F. peregrinus*).

We inadvertently flushed the owl from its burrow during our survey. The falcon dove on the owl while the owl was flying to a nearby burrow. The falcon drove the owl to the ground where it presumably killed the owl. The falcon then struggled with labored flight to carry the lifeless owl several hundred feet, where it landed out of sight in the grass. We were unable to find the second landing site.

Mammals, including badgers (*Taxidea taxus*) and coyotes (*Canis latrans*), are major predators of Burrowing Owls (Green and Anthony 1989, Haug et al 1993). However, raptors, including Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), Ferruginous Hawk (*B. regalis*), Red-tailed Hawk (*B. jamaicensis*), Peregrine Falcon, Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), and Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) have been observed or suspected to take Burrowing Owls, as well (Peeters 1963, Fitzner et al. 1977, Haug et al. 1993). Predation by the Prairie Falcon on Burrowing Owls has also been documented before (Haug et al. 1993).

The owl's attempt to fly to another burrow appeared to be a reaction to our presence, which may indicate that it considered us a threat. We apparently distracted the owl so that it did not notice the approaching falcon. The falcon's behavior of removing its kill and flying some distance

away may also have been caused by our presence. Prairie Falcons do not normally transport prey (except to nest sites), but rather simply eat their prey at the kill site (Steenhof 1998). Burrowing Owls have a mass range of 144-178 g (Plumpton and Lutz 1994) whereas Prairie Falcons have a mass range of 420-720 g (Steenhof 1998, Sibley 2000); therefore, transporting a Burrowing Owl several hundred feet away is a formidable task for the falcon (Steenhof 1998). – Howard O. Clark, Jr. and Norman R. Sisk, H.T. Harvey & Associates, 423 West Fallbrook Avenue, Suite 202, Fresno, CA, 93711.

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