

# **Piper the Prairie Falcon Biography**

## **Hatch Date**

We're probably looking at about mid to late May. I don't have the exact date for the simple fact that I don't monitor the nests that closely, so I can't get an exact date. We try to leave them quiet and peaceful and doing their own thing throughout the nesting season, and to be honest with you, since we never go into the nest when they're in courtship and just starting to lay, because we don't want to disturb them. Because if we disturb them, they could very well abandon the nest, which means no babies could hatch. So about the only thing we do is we can park a quarter to a half a mile away with a spotting scope and watch. Watch the parents' behavior and get kind of a rough idea, usually within just a few days, as to when they started to lay and when they hatched.

## **Day He Joined the Foundation**

July 1st, and so he was full grown and he was out of the nest. He was flying free, a completely wild Prairie Falcon, feeding himself when we trapped him. Please understand you have to have proper state and federal permits and all that kind of stuff to legally be able to do that. So he joined our family as one of our wildlife ambassadors and one of my personal falconry birds on July 1st.

## **Common Name**

Prairie Falcon. The reason we call them a Prairie Falcon is because of the habitat in which they prefer to live. They prefer really vast open deserts and relatively small cliffs. We have a lot of that habitat here in Southern Utah. Where the Peregrine Falcon loves canyons with thousand-foot cliffs, the Prairie Falcon prefers a lot more of an open space, so we call them Prairie Falcons. Some people call them a desert falcon.

## **Scientific Name**

*Falco mexicanus*. Which is obviously the Mexican falcon, and the reason again for that is, I believe, they were originally discovered in Mexico. Their territory ranges all through Mexico across the western United States and clear up into Canada. They are a western North American falcon.

## **Group**

The *Falco* genus, it's the falcons, and we have several different kinds of falcons, not only here in North America but throughout the world. There's some basic characteristics that qualify them as falcons. They have beautiful black eyes; all falcons have black eyes. Hawks can have brown eyes, blue eyes, orange eyes, yellow eyes, red eyes, but all falcons have black eyes. All falcons have a stripe that comes down below the eye. The Prairie Falcon has a very bold stripe coming down. With some of the falcons, the stripe is extremely faint, and it's maybe like one little tiny line of feathers that's almost invisible. Other falcons like the Peregrine, the stripe is so bold on their face that it covers the whole head. They all have the stripe. Falcons have pointed wings as can be seen on Piper. His beautiful pointed wings increase his speed. This is not a bird that soars. Very seldom do you see the large falcons when they're not pumping their wings as they're flying. Falcons have long skinny toes and relatively short legs. They don't have the long legs like a lot of the hawks have because the hawks catch most of what they want on the ground, where the falcon will hit their quarry in a dive at as much as 200 miles an hour. If they had long legs and they impacted a duck, or a pheasant, or any other larger bird, their legs would break. So they need the shorter, thicker legs in order to withstand the impacts that they put their bodies through when they're hunting, so that they're built significantly different than hawks, eagles, and owls, which makes them fascinating to work with. You have to adjust your styles and techniques to capitalize on what they do best.

## **Weight**

A small male Prairie Falcon can be 300 to 390 grams. That would be a very, very small little male Prairie Falcon. The males will go up to 450 grams, and we're talking grams for a larger male. The females will start off at about 700 grams, and they can go as much as 1200, even 1300 grams, for a very large female. And so, the females are significantly larger than the males.

## **Wingspan**

Piper is a little guy; his wingspan is close to about 2 feet, about 24 inches. A large female's wingspan could be closer to three feet.

## **Diet**

Mostly small birds and small mammals. The Prairie Falcon, as a youngster learning how to hunt and what it can and cannot eat, will occasionally catch large insects, and even very small lizards, small reptiles, and those kinds of things. But primarily they eat small mammals and small birds, which kind of separates them from some of the other large falcons, like the Peregrine Falcon, which is almost exclusively birds. The Prairie Falcon, because of where it lives out on the deserts, is primarily hunting a wider variety of foods than the Peregrine Falcon.

## **Activities**

The Prairie Falcon basically is either sitting on a cliff face relaxing, watching the world go by, or they're in the sky flying at relatively high speeds at significant altitudes looking for flocks of small birds down below them. When they spot a flock of small birds, the falcon will roll over, dive vertically at speeds that can reach up to 200 miles an hour, and with their feet they hit the small birds in the flock, knocking them down to the ground, flying down, and then having their breakfast, lunch, dinner, whatever time of day that happens to be. Like all apex predators, they want to burn as few calories as possible, and so when they're not hunting, they're usually just kind of sitting in a place that is cooler, quiet, and safe until they need to eat again. They're pretty much a couch potato. Piper is a bit unique in that Piper is one of our Wildlife Ambassadors as well as one of my falconry birds, and so during our

hunting season, September through February, I take Piper out and let him fly. He flies thousands of feet in the sky, up into the clouds, and then I flush ducks, pheasants, pigeons, whatever we have available to us, and Piper hunts that way just like every other wild falcon. Piper is a wildlife ambassador, so he travels with me as we do our educational programs teaching people about the Prairie Falcon. We have other wildlife ambassadors as well; we talk about a lot of different kinds of birds of prey. He does love to basically hang out in the house, in the living room, and watch our new dog and watch the cat, just be a member of the family. If we're not either out hunting or in the house where he's relaxed on our perch, he is out in a flight chamber where he can relax and sit on a perch. He has a bath pan, and he can bathe and just kind of relax again. When they're not hunting, they're fairly docile; they just want to be left alone and stay quiet.

## **Temperament and Personality**

The Prairie Falcon, that's kind of where we run into an issue with most falconers. The Prairie Falcon is, generally speaking, a little more high-strung, a little more instinctive, and a little more complicated to work with than some of the other large falcons. The Peregrine Falcon and the Gyrfalcon have a much more stable personality and disposition. This is why falconers don't really enjoy Prairie Falcons as much because they could be more complicated to work with. But I'll be honest with you, I love the Prairie Falcon for the simple fact that the quality of flight that I get out of a Prairie Falcon, in my opinion, is better than a Peregrine. The style that I really like to see and participate in, and so they can be somewhat difficult, complicated, and high-strung. And so, most falconers, when they try to fly a Prairie Falcon and decide this is not the best bird for their falconry, they would prefer a Peregrine or a Gyrfalcon or something along those lines that have a little more of a docile personality. Piper is probably the sweetest little Prairie Falcon that I've ever had, and we just love him to death.

## **Story of Arrival**

Well, basically, the story of arrival is that we went out and certainly got our capture permit and all of our permits and stuff ready to go. I was going to

acquire a Prairie Falcon from the nest, but then I decided what I really would prefer is to fly one that is full grown and wild and feeding on its own. We have several nesting sites in the area. We have a lot of Prairie Falcons here, and so one Prairie Falcon nest in particular, that I've gotten some wonderful birds from over the years... I went and checked on that nest site, and the young Prairie Falcons were flying. I was quite certain they would be flying. They were flying around in the canyon and chasing each other and screaming at mom and dad and begging for food and that kind of stuff. I decided I would wait till they were flying and eating on their own, what we call passage birds. We trapped him as what we call an early passage bird, where he could fly around and feed himself, and he was a full-grown bird, so there was no chance he would imprint on humans. We went out early in the morning and set up the trap station and backed about 1/4 mile away and sat with the spotting scope and watched. I'll be really honest with you, I thought I missed it. I thought, "Okay, at 7 o'clock in the morning the falcons are here; they're out probably on the desert hunting." I sat there till about 9:00 in the morning and nobody showed up, and it was very quiet. I'm going, okay, the falcons have left their nest and the nest site canyon where they were, and they're spread out through the open desert. We'll still be able to catch one, but it's going to be a little bit more complicated to drive along and watch the power poles and see if we can spot a falcon and set up the trap station and catch them as we do; that's all part of what falconry is. Then all of a sudden I hear a falcon calling, and it was a female, it was his sister, and she called and she flew up into the canyon and landed on the cliff faces. She was making noises, and so I kind of watched her, and then I watched about three other falcons come in the canyon, and so they were coming back after being out on the desert for a few hours. They came back up to the nesting area, and then all of a sudden there's a little Prairie Falcon caught in my trap station. I drove up there real quick and jumped out of the car and got him freed from the trap station. I was really hoping for a male instead of a female. The females are significantly larger, but I love the way the males fly; it's so much fun to watch them fly. The males are not as long-winded, and so they don't go as far away, a little easier to keep them within range, so we really wanted a male. But it just depends on what we catch. So here's this little male, and he's in the trap station, and we get him pulled out. I'm going, "Well, there's my little boy, he's such a cute little guy, such a

cute baby." We brought him home and put on his little leather anklets and jesses, and I've got a hood for him, and get starting to get him used to the equipment. I sat down in my recliner chair in the living room, put a towel down so that wouldn't make a mess on the floor, and started what we call the manning process, which is to acclimate them to their new environment. We just sit quietly, and I have food for him and just trying to coax him, say, "I'm a really nice guy, and here's food, and we're going to be great friends." And after about oh half hour to an hour of just sitting quietly with him on my glove and the dogs running into and out of the house and the cats wandering around, the falcon just being really amazingly good for a Prairie Falcon, not being stressed. The little guy jumps off my glove onto my chest, and I'm just kind of sitting there looking at him kind of laid back, and he's just standing right here looking at me, and then he lays down on my chest and just kind of stretches out a little bit, and closes his eyes and takes a nap. And I'm going, there's something really wrong with this Prairie Falcon. He is far too calm, he's far too pleasant, he's far too sweet. He really has had the nicest temperament of any Prairie Falcon that I've ever had, and we've just had so much fun with him that we're going to go ahead and work him through the molt, and we're going to fly him again next year, instead of reintroducing him back to the wild. We just had such a great time we're going to fly him again.

## **Treats**

It's not really treats they eat, but whole animals. He eats a lot of English house sparrows, which is an invasive species that we trap as a food source for the birds of prey. They eat a lot of starlings. I raise pigeons, and they eat a lot of pigeons, and they also eat quail. We purchase quail by the thousands to feed the injured wildlife. So they don't get fed treats as much as they get fed their normal diet. These guys would do very, very poorly on cookies and ice cream.

## **Life Expectancy**

In the wild for a Prairie Falcon, about 10 to 15 years would be considered normal. Now, that's assuming that they survive the first year. With all birds

of prey, about 80% don't survive the first year. The wild's a very, very tough place to make a living, and they have to learn how to feed themselves. They have to learn how to avoid other predators. They've got storms and wind and all sorts of really bad things: bob wire fences and power lines, and the world is full of a lot of dangers for these guys. So the first year they have to learn how to survive, and like I said, about 80% don't get past that first year. Then if all goes well, again we're looking at 10, maybe 15 years would be a normal life expectancy for one of these in the wild. But in captivity, because we reduce the threats to them, and they get guaranteed food every day, and they live in a much more comfortable environment, like they don't have to sit out on a cliff face at 10 below zero in a snowstorm, they have a much, much better quality of life. When they're worked by a qualified falconer and in captivity, if all goes well, we're really looking at between 20 to 30 years. So we literally double their life expectancy in captivity, if all goes well.