



# Short road trip may be best to see a Prairie Falcon

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

It was snowing on Jan. 16, 2016 as we walked through Walla Walla Point Park in Wenatchee.

As newcomers to the area, this trail served as a close and pleasant way to get some exercise, meet people and, occasionally, find some really interesting birds.

We were enjoying the plowed walking path when my wife, Dianne, called my attention to a fairly large bird perched at the top of one of the trees. I had no idea what it was.

I try to remember to take a camera along when we walk and had a modest telephoto zoom mounted on my Fuji camera. I approached the bird cautiously and shot several photos as I got closer. Eventually, the bird lost patience with me and flew. I managed a few images of it as it circled around us and disappeared.

We were surprised and elated once the images were on the computer and we could zoom in to identify the bird. We had just seen our very first Prairie Falcon.

A variety of raptors move into north central Washington during the winter. Most are outside urban areas but can be easily seen as you drive the roads on the Waterville Plateau.

It is not uncommon to see



*Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.*



**Prairie Falcon near Mansfield.**

Rough-legged Hawks, Redtail Hawks, Northern Harriers and American Kestrel sitting on powerline poles.

Prairie Falcons are also fairly common in these rural areas. We have seen several between Wenatchee and Bridgeport or Mansfield but have not seen another in Wenatchee since that first time.

Bigger than a crow but smaller than a Canada Goose, the Prairie Falcon is a medium-sized raptor. They are about 15-16 inches long with a 36-40 inch wingspan.

Similar to a Kestrel, they have a strong, dark line that extends down below the eye and a white line over the eye.

Prairie Falcons will hunt small mammals by flying close to the ground, similar to a Northern Harrier. During the winter months they survive on Horned Larks and Western Meadow-

larks.

The conversion of grasslands and shrub-steppe communities to large areas of single-use agriculture can result in fewer small mammals that these falcons rely on.

Developments that provide water and good ground cover may benefit the Prairie Falcon by increasing the number of ground squirrels and other rodents.

Winter driving on the Waterville Plateau can be an adventure but main roads are usually plowed and safe.

With an almost certain chance to see a variety of great, winter raptors, a drive out to a neighboring town for lunch can result in great bird views and photographs.

Remember to prepare properly for winter travel and don't forget your binoculars. Good luck.

## HOW ABOUT FEEDING HUMMERS THIS WINTER?

**Editor's note:** Reader Jerry Billingsley recently asked Bruce this question on our online page:

*We have been feeding hummingbirds all summer. What is your opinion on leaving the feeders out now or should we take them down so the birds will go south.*

Bruce's answer: The answer is that hummingbirds, and others, are programmed to migrate and will move out even if food is present during winter.

Anna's Hummingbirds do overwinter in Central Washington. I feed two to four all winter here in Wenatchee. I bought a small, clip-on heater to keep the nectar from freezing.

If you take your feeders down in spring/summer, the resident hummers will find other sources.

As I was learning about hummingbirds and feeders a very experienced birder told me that once you start feeding hummers, you take on the responsibility to keep providing food.

I think this is very important in winter. If you must stop feeding them, try to do so in the spring or summer when alternate sources are more abundant.

Once the birds are attached to your feeders they will rely on them for critical nutrition, especially first thing in the morning or at dusk.

To summarize, feeding during fall and winter will not prevent birds from migrating.

If you do feed during winter be diligent about it because the birds are really counting on a steady nectar source.

If you need to wean them from your yard and feeders, try to do so in spring or summer.