

Stories of Predation

60 Years of Watching Wildlife









ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-438-5 [trade hardback]
ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-435-4 [trade paperback]
ISBN-13: 978-0-88839-313-5 [epub]
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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Stories of predation : sixty years of watching wildlife / Dick Dekker.

Other titles: Sixty years of watching wildlife | 60 years of watching wildlife

Names: Dekker, Dick, author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200344978 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200345133 | ISBN 9780888394354 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780888393135 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Dekker, Dick. | LCSH: Naturalists—Canada—Biography. | LCSH: Predation (Biology)— Canada. | LCSH: Wildlife watching—Canada. | LCSH: Animals—Canada. | LCGFT: Autobiographies. Classification: LCC QH31.D45 A3 2020 | DDC 508.092—dc23

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Cover Design: Paul Ditters

Editing & photographs by the author unless otherwise stated

Printed in Canada

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and of the Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Hancock House gratefully acknowledges the Halkomelem Speaking Peoples whose unceded traditional territories our offices reside upon.

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DICK DEKKER

CHAPTER 9

Hit or Myth?

The first scientist who warned the western world that the peregrine population was being decimated by the sub-lethal effects of pesticides was a British ornithologist by the name of Derek Ratcliffe. Ironically, the reason he had undertaken his study was that England's pigeon fanciers had complained that peregrines were killing too many of their prized racing pigeons. As it turned out, it was not the pigeons that were in trouble but the falcons. Ratcliffe's report showed that the country's peregrine population was in free-fall. Despite his important and critical studies, Ratcliffe had little to say about the falcon's hunting habits.

In his 1980 handbook *The Peregrine Falcon*, he wrote that "the study of food by direct observation of peregrines in the act of killing prey is not really a practical proposition; a vast amount of time would be needed to collect a reasonable sample of observation." Bully for him, but I have clearly outdone his most pessimistic expectations. After sixty years of field observations, I have amassed about 500 sightings of prey capture. As he predicted, though, it has indeed taken me a vast amount of time, in fact more than half a lifetime.

A foremost authority on peregrine biology, Ratcliffe has done a great deal of field work, such as counting nest sites and collecting eggs, but he did not spend much time actually looking at what these superior flyers did in the air. Based on the peregrine's reputation as the fastest living animal in the world, Ratcliffe assumed that falcons pursued their prey high in the sky and struck them a violent blow from their talons that sent the victim tumbling down to the ground, either dead or mortally wounded. He even claimed that the force of the strike could be so great that the prey was decapitated.

In my experience, that conclusion is a misinterpretation of the common practice of prey-carrying peregrines to deliver just-captured prey a *coup-de-grâce*. In flight, the falcon bends its head down while briefly bringing its feet forward. With its strong bill, it then bites through the neck vertebrae of the prey. Decapitation may be postponed until the falcon has landed. If you

happen to come across the freshly plucked remains of a gull or a shorebird, you generally find the head separate from the carcass.

Unfortunately, Ratcliffe's inaccurate opinions are often repeated in the popular literature on the species. His idea of the classical aerial strike may be typical for peregrines that are flown by expert falconers. Released over open fields or moorland, these birds are trained to 'wait on' high overhead while the falconer and his helpers, assisted by dogs, attempt to flush a grouse or partridge out of the vegetation. The falcon then stoops down hurriedly to overtake the fleeing bird before it drops back into cover. Raked by the falcon's claws, the wounded prey falls down.

There is, however, a big difference between the hunting habits of trained and wild peregrines. The wild ones have to create their own opportunities, and they very seldom strike their prey in flight so that it plummets to earth, dead or wounded. The reason they don't just smack the flying target is that these prey would be lost if they fell into bushes or reeds. In the vast majority of the successful hunting flights that I have seen during half a century of watching, wild falcons grabbed the prey in their feet and carried it down to a convenient plucking post.

Nevertheless, the very first serious hunt that I saw was indeed a singular aerial strike. It featured an adult female peregrine pursuing a pigeon high in the sky. After two stoops that narrowly missed the target, she scored a hit that resulted in a burst of feathers, but the pigeon flew on and took shelter in a copse of birches. On the mossy ground under the trees, I soon found the pigeon, stone dead, with a large, bloody wound in the chest. That falcon's aerial hit was probably just a clumsy attempt at seizing the prey.

My second observation of a successful hunt was very different. An adult male peregrine took off from a high perch on a power pylon, flew down low over open meadows for some distance and, point-blank, seized a widgeon sitting in the wet grass. After a struggle, the falcon began to plume the duck.

Both of these sightings took place in Holland in the 1950s. In those days, peregrine populations were in catastrophic decline in all of western Europe, due to the lethal and sub-lethal effects of DDT and other toxic chemicals used in agriculture.

My chances of observing peregrines greatly improved after I moved to Edmonton in 1959. There, too, the local breeding population was close to dying out, but numerous northern falcons still came through on their migrations to and from arctic regions.

A good place to spot them was Beaverhills Lake, in those days a fabled mecca for Alberta's birdwatchers, although, when questioned, they appeared to know little about peregrines. But a waterfowl hunter said that he had recently seen a 'duck hawk'. Flying very fast along the shore, the falcon had hit one duck after the other and just dropped them dead into the water. With a look of contempt on his face, the man added that the hawk had not even attempted to pick up its kills.

In subsequent years, I learned that plunging down with a great splash is indeed the instinctive reaction of ducks that are attacked by peregrines over water. It might then look as if they had been hit, but dropping down is just the routine way flying ducks have of evading an attack. On the other hand, flying ducks that are overtaken over land may be seized in the falcon's feet. Grappled together, predator and prey then fall to the ground.

Arctic peregrines on spring migration pass through central Alberta from mid-April to the end of May. Assuming that the early morning would be the best time to see them hunting, I used to start my shoreline walks just after sunrise. If I spotted a peregrine perched on a fence post, I sat down on a convenient field stone and kept the bird under observation in the hope that it would soon become active. But that could take most of the morning. After the sun had warmed the air temperature, the falcon would finally spread its long wings in the leisurely, almost sensual way characteristic of the species, holding them fully extended for several seconds. When it jumped off the post, the falcon dropped down to just above the grass, and with quick, sculling wingbeats climbed higher into the breeze. It then began to soar, drifting downwind and gaining altitude. Eventually, it flexed its wings at a sharp angle, resembling an arrowhead, and turned north in a long glide until it dissolved into the distance. Apparently, instead of hunting, these peregrines resumed their migration to arctic breeding grounds.

During my early morning walks, it was not unusual to come across the plucked remains of ducks lying in the grass, but there was no telling at what time of day they might have been killed. Could it have been near dawn, or perhaps the previous evening?

To find out where migrating peregrines spent the night, I kept an immature falcon under observation until well after sundown. It was perched on a fence post by the lakeshore. At dusk, it suddenly took flight, flew low over the grass and made an upward try for a pair of ducks that were heading inland,

clearly visible against the cloudless evening sky. The ducks evaded the attack and the hunting falcon flew on, disappearing from sight in the deepening dusk.

On another day, also near sundown, I watched a peregrine circling high over the lakeshore until it suddenly stooped to tackle a flying duck and tumbled down to the ground. Trying to locate its kill, I involuntarily approached too closely, so that the falcon flushed and flew away. That evening I parked my station wagon on the pasture and camped for the night. At the crack of dawn, I set up the telescope and saw that the falcon was back at the kill site. Its head movements indicated that it was feeding.

The late timing of these observations explains why I so seldom had seen falcons hunt in the early morning. Apparently, most of their foraging had been done during the previous evening. These peregrines entered the night with a well-filled crop and could take life easy the following morning, prior to resuming their migration.



Up to the 1990s, the size of internationally famous Beaverhills Lake was 140 square kilometres. When you stood on the south shore looking north, water touched the horizon. By 2006, the entire lake had dried up.



Cooking Lake with the avocet islet. Marsh ragwort is the first plant to colonize the muddy shores in spring.



The greater and the lesser yellowlegs. The only other such combo of two bird species that are similar in plumage but of different proportions, are the raven and the crow. Yellowlegs are hunters in their own right, picking up aquatic insects by sight.

Photo Steve Knight



With their sensitive upturned bill, avocets sweep the water and collect their food by feel. In flight, the black-and-white plumage of a flock of avocets dazzles and deters attacking falcons.

Photo Dawne Colwell