

FIELD OBSERVATION REPORT

By Mary Wilson
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Poppy Reserve

The poppies had a slow start this year. They can start germinating in November, however, this year they started germination in January. I went to the reserve on February 5th and I saw quite a few poppy plants with their true leaves that measured up to 1-inch. The grasses are up to 3 to 4-inches, filaree has true leaves and some are red from stress, fiddle-neck leaves measure about 1-inch. I also found new lupine leaves and a few pygmy-lupine coming up. The bunch grasses are starting to get new blades. Hopefully we may have a few poppies blooming by the March 1st opening day.

Mountain Bluebirds—Carrie Bemis, State Park Environmental Scientist, was at the Poppy Reserve and saw many hundreds of these birds. They were moving slowly in a huge flock, but widely spaced. I have witnessed these birds in the fall and winter while doing research on the burrowing owls.



Photo taken at the reserve November 2011



Motion camera photo by burrowing owl habitat 01-28-17

Mountain Bluebirds are small thrushes and are relatives of the eastern and western bluebirds. They are sky-blue, a bit darker on wings and tail and a lot paler below with white under the tail. Females are mostly gray-brown with tinges of pale blue in the wings and tails. They breed in native habitats such as prairie, sagebrush and alpine tundra, anywhere with open country with at least a few trees that can provide nest cavities. Females usually build the nests themselves, have a clutch of four to five white eggs and incubate about 14 days. Both males and females feed the young and fiercely protect the nest. The young will leave the nest in about 21 days after incubation.

They hover over the ground and fly down to catch insects and will pounce on their prey from a perch such as a bush or tree. They mainly eat insects and like juniper berries. They will forage in flocks in the winter.

Since they are cavity nesters they will also take up residence in nest boxes. The nest boxes should be a platform feeder and furnished with meal worms, berries or peanuts. Supposedly they will not abandon a nest if human activity is detected close by or at the nest.

Another bird spotted at the reserve this year is the **Prairie Falcon** (*Falco mexicanus*). It is a medium-large sized falcon of western North America. It is about the size of a peregrine falcon. Plumage is gray-brown above and pale with dark mottling below. The darkest part of the upper side are the primary wing feathers, the lightest are the rump and tail, particularly the outer tail feathers. The head has a “moustache” mark like a peregrine falcon’s but narrower and a white line over the eye.



Motion camera photo taken 01-30-17

Courtship involves flying about and calling near potential nesting ledges. The male performs aerial acrobatics and will strut back and forth. Nest sites are typically on a ledge of a cliff protected by an overhang or rock. Sometimes nests are on dirt banks or they will use an abandoned nest of a raven or hawk but rarely uses nests in trees. They do not build a nest but scrape in gravel or dirt on a ledge.

They will have a clutch of 3 to 5 eggs that are whitish and spotted brown. Incubation is done mostly by the female for about 31 days. The male brings food to the female and he may sit on the eggs temporarily while she is eating. The young leave the nest at about 5 to 6 weeks after hatching.

The prairie falcon eats mostly small mammals and small to medium-sized birds caught in flight, though as an opportunistic predator will occasionally take larger birds. Common mammalian prey for prairie falcons includes squirrels, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, chipmunks, gophers, and rabbits of various species. Reptiles are also sometimes taken. Bird prey commonly includes sparrows, starlings, grackles, doves, quail, meadow larks, pigeons, coots, teal, and mallards – virtually any bird of up to approximately the falcon’s own size and occasionally larger.

The prairie falcon is nearly the size of the peregrine, but differs in its hunting behavior, often pursuing small prey with rapid, maneuverable flight close to the ground. They hunt by flying fast and low over the ground, taking prey by surprise. They will also dive steeply from the air or pursue birds in flight. The dramatic high speed diving from high altitude allows it to overtake the swiftest of birds or it will deliver a knock-out blow to large prey. At impact the prey is hit with a closed foot or feet, or swiped with an open foot armed with talons. High-speed films have shown that this method is the more common, with the toes closed into a “fist” immediately after striking. The claw on the hind toe, or hallux, is particularly effective and deadly in raking the prey. When the closed foot strike is used it is typically directed against the head or wing of the prey, and if it does not outright kill the prey is often rendered unconscious or unable to fly.

This species is often used in falconry. It is the most popular falcon captured from the wild for falconry purposes in the United States, due to its abundance and relative ease to acquire. It is valued for its aggressiveness, agility, and determination to bring down game.