



Ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon reproductive and behavioral responses to human activity near the Kevin Rim, Montana
by Russell Carl Van Horn

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Fish and Wildlife Management
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The reproductive and behavioral responses of nesting ferruginous hawks (*Buteo regalis*) and prairie falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) and the behavioral responses of roadside foraging raptors to human activity and artifacts were studied on a 148 km² study area near Kevin, Montana during the 1991 and 1992 nesting seasons. Thirty-four ferruginous hawk and 24 prairie falcon breeding sites were occupied during the study. Ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon site occupancy was not significantly influenced by the presence of powerlines, roads, or active oil wells. Ferruginous hawks nested primarily on outcrops and cliffs (54%) or elevated ground sites (42%) and were clumped along the Kevin Rim, a prominent sandstone escarpment. Ferruginous hawk nesting density (8.4 km² /pair) was among the highest reported in the literature, but productivity was relatively low (47% success, 1.1 fledglings/occupied nest). The primary cause of ferruginous hawk pre-dispersal mortality was wet weather, which caused 37% of all losses. The local ferruginous hawk population may not be able to sustain itself at current levels if wet weather patterns continue to destroy nests and young. Prairie falcon productivity was also relatively low (71% success, 1.9 fledglings/occupied nest) but appeared sufficient to maintain the population. There was no significant difference between ferruginous hawk or prairie falcon reactions to intrusion in areas with petroleum development. Ferruginous hawks in the Kevin Rim area were quicker to respond to human activity than ferruginous hawks in other studies, which may have been due to past human activity levels or reduced prey availability. Foraging ferruginous hawks avoided humans more than Swainson's hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*), northern harriers (*Circus cyaneus*), or red-tailed hawks (*Buteo iamaicensis*). In spite of this, ferruginous hawks still foraged along secondary roads in oilfields more than expected. Human activity in the area affected only a fraction of the local ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon breeding populations.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Science

in

Fish and Wildlife Management

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

September 1993

71378
V312

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the assistance, advice, and guidance of Dr. L.R. Irby and Dr. A. R. Harmata during all phases of this study. Dr. T.E. McMahon critically reviewed the manuscript and Dr. H.D. Picton critically reviewed my capabilities. Dr. A.R. Harmata generously loaned radio-telemetry and trapping equipment.

Dr. D. L. Gustafson made the map included in this thesis. I thank K.R. Bousquet and M. Restani for assistance and advice during field work.

Several Kevin Rim area ranchers and petroleum lease operators permitted research activities on their land. T. Day of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and D. Flath, Nongame Program of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, arranged logistical support and research vehicles. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, T.L. Ruggles, for her patience, humor, and support during this study.

Funding for the project was provided by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Nongame Program of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
ABSTRACT.....	xii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
STUDY AREA.....	3
Location and Land Ownership.....	3
Geology.....	3
Climate and Weather.....	5
Vegetation.....	6
Wildlife.....	7
Human Impacts.....	7
METHODS.....	10
Nest Searches and Documentation.....	10
Nest Defense and Reproductive Success.....	11
Banding and Radio-telemetry.....	12
Adult Mortality.....	13
Foraging Habitat Use and Reactions to Human Presence.....	13
Prey Availability.....	14
Human Oilfield Activity.....	14
Data Analysis.....	14
RESULTS.....	17
Nest Substrates.....	17
Site Occupancy and Reuse.....	17
Reactions to Breeding Site Intrusions.....	19
Reproductive Success.....	21
Breeding Phenology.....	23
Fledgling Movements.....	23
Telemetry.....	24
Mortality.....	25
Foraging Perch Use, Habitat Use, and Response to Humans.....	27
Prey Availability.....	28
Human Oilfield Activities.....	29

TABLE OF CONTENTS--Continued

	Page
DISCUSSION.....	30
Nest Substrate Selection.....	30
Human Influences on Breeding Site Selection.....	31
Breeding Site Reuse.....	35
Reaction to Breeding Site Intrusion.....	35
Productivity and Population Stability.....	38
Post-fledging Period.....	39
Foraging Behavior.....	40
CONCLUSIONS AND MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS.....	43
LITERATURE CITED.....	50
APPENDICES.....	60
Appendix A--Mammalian and Avian Species of the Kevin Rim Area.....	61
Appendix B--Statistical Tables and Comparisons.....	64
Appendix C--Theoretical and Observed Nest Defense.....	75
Appendix D--Ferruginous Hawk Gender and Plumage Color.....	79
Appendix E--Nesting and Foraging Behavior of Other Raptors....	82

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Monthly and annual precipitation totals (cm), departures from average (cm), days of precipitation, and mean temperatures (°C) for Sunburst, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	6
2. Distances (km) from ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon breeding sites to the nearest sources of human activity and occupied raptor sites on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	19
3. Distances (m) at which ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons reacted in response to a human intruder near their breeding sites on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992	20
4. Mayfield productivity and success estimates and the known pre-dispersal mortality rates for ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	22
5. Estimated egg laying, hatching, and fledging dates for ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	23
6. Number of Richardson's ground squirrels seen during five minute periods at burrow concentrations in mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and early evening during five days on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1991.....	28
7. Mammalian species observed on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	62
8. Avian species observed on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	62
9. Road densities (km/km ²) in the three units and the entire Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	65
10. Ferruginous hawk (FH) and prairie falcon (PF) nest locations, substrates, and reproductive history on the Kevin Rim study area, 1991 and 1992.....	65

LIST OF TABLES--Continued

Table	Page
11. Distances (km) from unoccupied and occupied ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon breeding sites to the nearest sources of human activity and occupied raptor sites on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	68
12. Distances (m) at which ferruginous hawks reacted in response to a human intruder near their nests in the reference and developed regions of the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	69
13. Distances (m) at which prairie falcons reacted in response to a human intruder near their eyries in the reference and developed regions of the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	69
14. Grouped confidence intervals (90%) for observed (O) and expected use of foraging perches by ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks on the Kevin Rim study area, 1991 and 1992.....	70
15. Grouped confidence intervals (90%) for observed (O) and expected use of roads and roadside habitats by ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	71
16. Density and distribution of occupied ferruginous hawk nests reported in the literature and observed on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	72
17. Ferruginous hawk reproductive success and productivity rates reported in the literature and observed on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	73
18. Prairie falcon reproductive success and productivity rates reported in the literature and observed on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	74
19. Perch use (%) by foraging ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	84
20. Availability and use (%) of roadsides by foraging ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	84

LIST OF TABLES--Continued

Table	Page
21. Availability and use (%) of roadside habitats by foraging ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	85
22. Distances (m) at which roadside foraging ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, and red-tailed hawks reacted to human or vehicular presence on the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992.....	85

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Road distributions in the developed (D), reference (R), and extension (E) units of the Kevin Rim study area, Montana, 1991 and 1992. Thick lines indicate unit boundaries, double lines represent roads, and the dotted line represents the edge of Kevin Rim.....	4

ABSTRACT

The reproductive and behavioral responses of nesting ferruginous hawks (Buteo regalis) and prairie falcons (Falco mexicanus) and the behavioral responses of roadside foraging raptors to human activity and artifacts were studied on a 148 km² study area near Kevin, Montana during the 1991 and 1992 nesting seasons. Thirty-four ferruginous hawk and 24 prairie falcon breeding sites were occupied during the study. Ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon site occupancy was not significantly influenced by the presence of powerlines, roads, or active oil wells. Ferruginous hawks nested primarily on outcrops and cliffs (54%) or elevated ground sites (42%) and were clumped along the Kevin Rim, a prominent sandstone escarpment. Ferruginous hawk nesting density (8.4 km²/pair) was among the highest reported in the literature, but productivity was relatively low (47% success, 1.1 fledglings/occupied nest). The primary cause of ferruginous hawk pre-dispersal mortality was wet weather, which caused 37% of all losses. The local ferruginous hawk population may not be able to sustain itself at current levels if wet weather patterns continue to destroy nests and young. Prairie falcon productivity was also relatively low (71% success, 1.9 fledglings/occupied nest) but appeared sufficient to maintain the population. There was no significant difference between ferruginous hawk or prairie falcon reactions to intrusion in areas with petroleum development. Ferruginous hawks in the Kevin Rim area were quicker to respond to human activity than ferruginous hawks in other studies, which may have been due to past human activity levels or reduced prey availability. Foraging ferruginous hawks avoided humans more than Swainson's hawks (Buteo swainsoni), northern harriers (Circus cyaneus), or red-tailed hawks (Buteo jamaicensis). In spite of this, ferruginous hawks still foraged along secondary roads in oilfields more than expected. Human activity in the area affected only a fraction of the local ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon breeding populations.

INTRODUCTION

The Kevin Rim, a sandstone escarpment in north-central Montana, supports one of the highest nesting densities of grassland raptors in western North America (Dubois 1988, Harmata et al. 1991). The Kevin Rim Special Management Area has been declared a Key Raptor Area by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), where "unusually high nesting populations occur resulting from special habitat features" (Olendorff et al. 1989:21). Ferruginous hawks (Buteo regalis) and prairie falcons (Falco mexicanus) are common breeders in the area and golden eagles (Aquila chrysaetos) and burrowing owls (Athene cunicularia) also nest in the area. These raptors are considered Species of Special Concern in Montana (Flath 1984). Nesting ferruginous hawks may be especially sensitive to disturbance (Fyfe and Olendorff 1976). In addition, the ferruginous hawk is classed as a Category II species (species of high national concern) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and was on the Audubon Society's Blue List (declining species vulnerable to extinction) from 1971 to 1986 and has since been a Species of Special Concern to that organization (Tate 1986). Some researchers believe populations have increased since 1980 (Warkentin and James 1985, Gossett and Bechard 1992), but others disagree (National Audubon Society 1992, A.R. Harmata pers. commun.).

Petroleum extraction and agricultural activities have occurred on and around the Kevin Rim for decades (Perry 1953) and may affect local raptor populations. I had 6 primary objectives regarding raptors nesting in the Kevin Rim area but emphasized breeding ferruginous hawks and prairie

falcons. The objectives were: 1) locate all occupied ferruginous hawk and prairie falcon breeding sites and monitor their productivity, 2) determine impact of human activities on site occupancy and productivity, 3) document reaction to humans of breeding ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons, 4) evaluate use of surrounding areas by foraging ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons, 5) measure reaction to humans of foraging ferruginous hawks and prairie falcons, and 6) develop management recommendations for the Kevin Rim area.

STUDY AREA

Location and Land Ownership

The 148 km² study area was located northwest of the town of Kevin in Toole County, Montana (Fig. 1). Elevations ranged from 1013 m to 1310 m above sea level. Topography varied from alkali flats in the southeast to hills and ravines in the north and sandstone escarpments in the west. Several springs, numerous ephemeral wetlands, scattered livestock reservoirs, and 2 freshwater ponds (< 0.5 km²) were the only freshwater sources.

I divided the study area into 3 units for this study (Fig. 1). The northern badlands and the adjacent section of the Kevin Rim were designated as the "reference unit" (43.8 km²). This unit corresponded to the Badlands control area of Harmata et al. (1991). The alkali flats, the southern portion of the Kevin Rim and rolling areas immediately west of the cliffs were designated as the "developed unit" (88.1 km²). This approximately corresponded to the experimental area of Harmata et al. (1991). Rolling grasslands and low (< 20 m) rock outcrops adjacent to the southwest end of the Kevin Rim were designated as the study area "extension" (16.0 km²).

Geology

The Kevin Rim is composed of Eagle (Virgelle) sandstone, an Upper Cretaceous sediment overlaying petroleum-bearing Lower Cretaceous and

