

PEREGRINE FALCON STEALS PREY FROM WHITE-TAILED KITES

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Kleptoparasitism, one individual stealing a prey item from another, is common among and between many raptor species (Newton 2010). The White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) is an occasional victim of kleptoparasitism (Rigolosi and Hayes 2018) with published observations of prey theft by the Aplomado Falcon (*Falco femoralis*; Brown et al. 2003, Raimilla et al. 2015), Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*; Temeles 1990), Chimango Caracara (*Milvago chimango*; Baladrón and Pretelli 2013), a variety of hawks (Dunk and Cooper 1994), and the American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*; Dixon et al. 1957). Baladrón and Pretelli (2013) documented one case of a kite being kleptoparasitized by a Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*). Rigolosi and Hayes (2018) reported an apparently unsuccessful attempt at kleptoparasitism of a White-tailed Kite by an immature Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*); however, there are no published reports of successful kleptoparasitism involving this species pair.

On 9 and 10 September 2021 near Half Moon Bay, San Mateo County, California, Phenicie and Zamek observed numerous instances of an adult Peregrine Falcon stealing voles (probably *Microtus californicus*) from White-tailed Kites. Phenicie obtained several photos of this behavior on 10 September (Figure 1 and this issue's outside back cover). This location is a large grassy meadow on a bluff along the Pacific coast and is frequented by many raptor species, including the kite, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), and Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). During their two days of observation, Phenicie and Zamek saw as many as 10 White-tailed Kites hunting in this location. Also present both days was an adult Peregrine Falcon, usually perched on a light post.

A typical encounter began with a kite catching a vole and the falcon immediately flying directly to the kite, snatching the prey item in flight from the kite, and then returning to its perch to consume the item. Zamek estimated that this occurred 1–2 times per hour over the course of their observations. In some cases there was a brief struggle over the prey with the kite vocalizing during the struggle. They observed one instance of a kite dropping its prey while the falcon was in pursuit. In one case, the two birds briefly cartwheeled together as they struggled, a behavior also observed by Raimilla et al. (2015) between a White-tailed Kite and an Aplomado Falcon. On occasion, a kite would be allowed to keep and consume its prey without pursuit by the falcon. From time to time, the falcon chased after kites that did not have prey, then quickly returned to its perch.

It seems likely that, given the overlapping ranges of these two species, this behavior has been previously observed, but perhaps not well documented. With numbers of Peregrine Falcons within the range of the White-tailed Kite steadily increasing (Pandolfino and Handel 2018, Sauer et al. 2020), kleptoparasitism of kites by this falcon may be more frequently observed. It is possible that adult Peregrine Falcons may be more successful than immatures in kleptoparasitizing White-tailed Kites. The only previously published attempt of kleptoparasitism of a White-tailed Kite by a Peregrine Falcon, which was unsuccessful, was by a juvenile falcon (Rigolosi and Hayes 2018). More observations are required to test this hypothesis.

We also found it surprising that there are no published reports of White-tailed Kites kleptoparasitizing any other species, despite the kite's generally aggressive

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FIGURE 1. An adult Peregrine Falcon successfully stealing prey from a White-tailed Kite near Half Moon Bay, California, 10 September 2021. See also this issue's outside back cover for the approach preceding this encounter.

Photos by Ken Phenicie, Jr.

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reactions to other raptors near their nesting or roosting sites (Dunk 2020). This is an aspect of White-tailed Kite behavior that may be worth further study.

We thank Ryan Terrill, Floyd Hayes, and Brian Sullivan for helpful comments on the manuscript.

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Accepted 29 March 2022
Associate editor: Ryan S. Terrill