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the Blue Vesper

Ecology and Conservation of the Red-footed Falcon

Edited by
Péter Palatitz
Szabolcs Solt
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Red-footed Falcon Conservation Workgroup

What a peculiar bird this is!
Red-footed Falcons do not build nests, and their breeding colonies resemble a noisy apartment block full of parakeets. They mostly feed on insects that they catch in mid-air like swallows. On their way to Africa, they can fly for days on end, covering several thousands of kilometres.
Photo by Bence Máté

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Suggested citation:
The whole book: Palatitz P., Solt Sz. and Fehérvári P. (Eds.), 2018. *THE BLUE VESPER. Ecology and Conservation of the Red-footed Falcon*, Budapest, MME.
Specific chapter: Author(s). Title of the chapter (pp.). In Palatitz P., Solt Sz. and Fehérvári P. (Eds.), 2018. *THE BLUE VESPER. Ecology and Conservation of the Red-footed Falcon*, Budapest, MME.

First published in Hungary, 2018 by MME BirdLife Hungary, Gergő Halmos director

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in 3000 copies (Hungarian, English, Slovak) with the financial support of the European Commission LIFE Nature Fund from the project **LIFE11/NAT/HU/000926 'Conservation of the Red-footed Falcon in the Carpathian Basin' 2012-2018**

Printed and bound in Hungary

ISBN 978-615-80925-4-8
www.falcoproject.eu

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CHAPTER 1

Description

| Szabolcs Solt

Raptors, such as the Red-footed Falcon, belong to the taxonomic order *Falconiformes*. Worldwide more than 300 species of birds of prey are known to science, 36 of which have been recorded in Hungary to date. Although morphologically they can be quite different, they share some common features such as the hooked bill which they use to tear the prey apart and strong feet armed with sharp talons to seize prey both in the air and on the ground. It is characteristic of all members of the order that, although they are born with poor vision, chicks hatch with their eyes open and their body is covered with light down feathering. They take food from their mother's beak from the very beginning, their begging behaviour first elicited by movement and then colour of the food. Between the two well separated orders, *Accipitriformes* and *Falconiformes*, we can find numerous basic differences: while the members of former build their own nests, in the latter they either occupy other species' nests or lay eggs on the bare surface e.g. ground, in a hollow on a rock wall or cliff ledge. Falcons and kestrels differ significantly from the members of *Accipitriformes* in their build as well[45]. A further difference is that while members of the latter kill the prey with their talons, falcons and kestrels usually hold their prey tightly in their feet and kill it using the beak. Another striking difference is that while hawks catch the prey with both legs, kestrels and falcons manage to do it with one leg only.

The Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus* Linnaeus 1766) belongs to the family Falconidae within the order Falconiformes. The genus name *Falco* originates from the Latin word *falx*, *falcis* which means "scythe" referring to the shape of the bird's talons. Its species name *vespertinus* comes from another Latin word *vesper* meaning "night" and can be found in its foreign names (in Romanian: *Vânturelul de seară*, in Serbian: Siva *vetruška* namely night falcon). This refers to its hunting behaviour around dusk and the characteristic phenomenon when up to hundreds or even thousands of them gather in late summer to roost together. The Red-footed Falcon is a monotypic species. Its closest relative, the Amur Falcon *(Falco amurensis)*, nowadays inhabits the eastern parts of Asia with a well separated distribution. In the past the two species probably used to coexist sympatrically, one of the reasons why they were considered subspecies until as

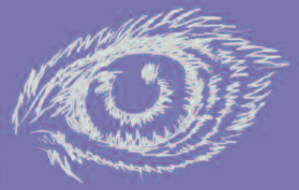
The cere of the male is the brightest orange-red in May. Presumably these contrasting plumage and bare part ornaments help seduce females looking for a mate.
Photo by Péter Palatitz

Adult male and female Red-footed Falcons can easily be distinguished from every other raptor commonly seen in the Carpathian Basin based on their plumage, orange-red feet and whitish claws.
Photo by Bence Máté

The Red-footed falcon

Falco vespertinus

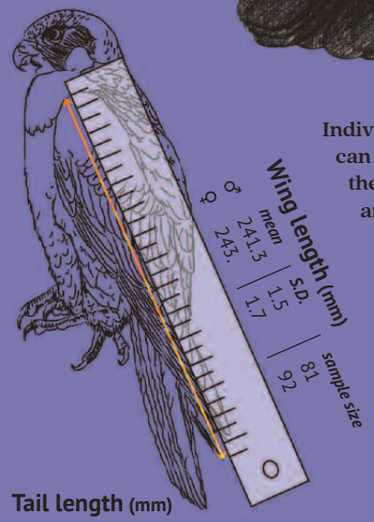
The tomial tooth of the upper mandible helps to snap the vertebra of the prey.



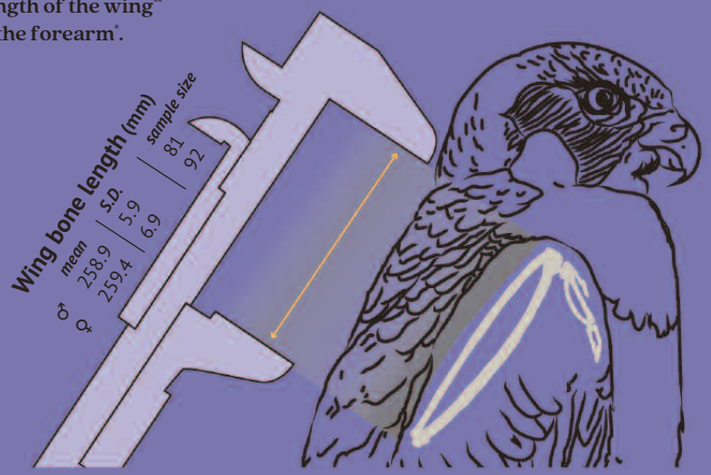
Vision is the most valuable among their senses, falcons may spot almost all movement within a range of 3 kilometers.

The dove sized slim body belongs to an agile aerial hunter.

On each foot, four strong toes bear curved talons that sink into larger prey to hold it tight.



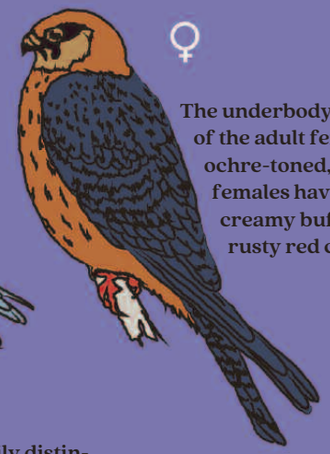
Individual differences can be described by the length of the wing** and the forearm*.



Tail length (mm)

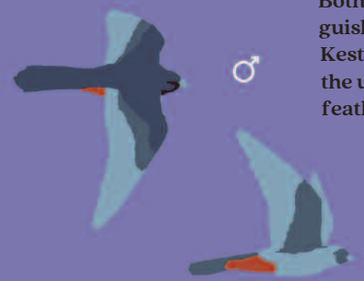
	mean	*S.D.*	*sample size*
♂	130.0	4.5	76
♀	130.0	5.1	85

The adult male can be easily distinguished from any other bird based on plumage colouration.

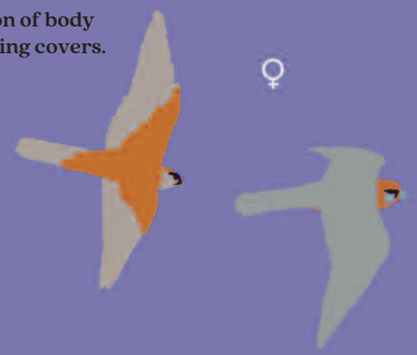


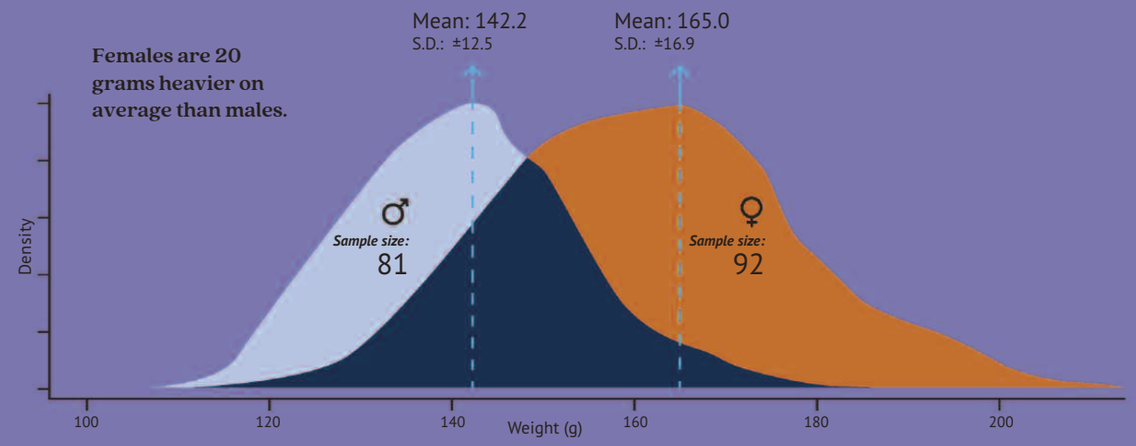
The underbody and head of the adult female is ochre-toned, but some females have a dark creamy buff or rarely, rusty red colouration.

The flight is powerful, wing beats are often intercepted with glides and thermal soaring.



Both sexes can be easily distinguished from the Common Kestrel by the shorter tail and the uniform coloration of body feathers and underwing covers.





* The radius and ulna measured together
** Measured from the joint of the wing bone to the tip of the longer primary flight feather