

immediately after striking. The claw on the hind toe, or hallux, is particularly effective and deadly in raking the prey. Larger prey birds are left to tumble and are often dead before they hit the ground. Peregrines and Gyrfalcons have been known to knock the heads off ducks in the sky. Smaller birds are snatched outright, or retrieved in the air after a quick turn by the falcon. Falcons are able to turn in short distances at high speed, and if the prey bird is missed the first time, they can pull up and circle back, sometimes over and over again. There seems to be a fine line between flying fast enough to catch their prey, and flying too fast and thus risking injury.

HUNTING TACTICS

American Kestrels certainly don't need to reach such high speeds to secure insects or rodents on the ground. They are often seen hovering over a hunting area scanning the terrain below—an energy-expending tactic. Hovering takes about four times more energy than level flight. Obviously, the higher they hover the more ground they can see, but the distance to the prey is increased, as is the time it takes to reach the prey, so there is a trade-off. Merlins may tail-chase a flock of birds, flying behind and selecting the one that doesn't react quickly enough or lags behind. Prey birds pack together tightly, turning in unison in an effort to confuse the falcon by presenting too many targets. An impaired bird stands out and is killed. Aplomado Falcons often employ



A Prairie Falcon takes off. —ROB PALMER