



A Peale's Falcon Idyll

By Lawrence Crowley

Surrounded by an angry ocean, on a minute island miles from the mainland, I am crawling on a slippery, moss covered ledge, forty feet above the rocky talus below, where waves are crashing from the restless sea. A light drizzle accompanies the misty fog. I am thinking, "Do I really want to do this? Is it worth the risk? I have no safety net. If I slide off and drop onto the rocks I will certainly break and likely die. Why am I here? Please let me get down safely!"

It was 1967. Months earlier I had received a permit to take a peale's falcon, the largest subspecies of peregrines in the world, from Alaska. I had read everything I could find, gleaned every drop of information from people who had preceded me in my quest, and during the preceding month prepared myself physically for this adventure by hiking and climbing to golden eagle nests in Wyoming to band their young. I was thirty-years-old and I brimmed with confidence. My friend Mike had also secured a permit and we planned to partner as a team, sharing the mutual goal of each returning with a young peale's peregrine.



We flew from Denver to Metlakatla, a diminutive village on Annette Island in southeastern Alaska. At the southern end of the island was an Indian reservation and in Metlakatla a Coast Guard station. One road connected these two centers of population. The handful of automobiles on the island bore long expired licenses, but Alaska didn't care. There were no hotels, no restaurants, no stores and no place to stay overnight, but providently, we had packed camping equipment for just such a happenstance. Alas, our luggage had been lost in transition.

Fortunately, a friendly man, George, who was one of two men who worked at the airport, kindly invited us to stay at his home. He provided us with beds and bath. That evening George drove us to the beach, and welcomed us onto his small motor boat, invited us to harvest Dungeness crabs from the sea. It was a new experience for Mike and me. We hauled crab traps into the boat, soon filling it with chitinous creatures. Back on shore, George filled an immense kettle with salt water, heating it with a Coleman stove. While we waited for it to boil, George showed us how to prepare the crabs for the pot. The Alaskan crab preparation method was to secure a crab by the legs on one side of its body with one hand, and the legs on its other side with the other hand, then forcefully crash the beast's back against the sharp edge of the wooden dock, sundering the crab's body in two. Then we should shake both halves in the sea, allowing its innards to wash away.

When we had rendered the crabs into proper halves, they were summarily placed into the boiling pot. When George deemed them ready, they were removed, their legs cracked open and their musculature gleefully and gratefully consumed. It was one of the most unique, memorable and delicious meals I have ever had. At dusk we returned to George's home for a welcome night's sleep.

After sharing a hearty breakfast with us, George informed us that our luggage had arrived. Happy news! Our next task was to locate a fishing boat with a captain who would be willing to take us to the island we had determined had the best chance of providing us with peale's falcons. George connected us with Norm, an Indian who had a fishing boat and who was willing to convey us. We negotiated a price, loaded our gear onboard, thanked George and set out for the distant island.

The sea was rough. Heading into a furious wind, we encountered 18-20 foot waves. After about 15 miles, Norm asked if we were ready to go back. Clearly he wanted to. We asked him to continue. Norm kept pointing out places where a fellow fisherman's boat had gone down and, after telling us the ocean was "rougher than a cob," inquired repeatedly if we were ready to go back. We were resolute in proceeding.

Between the up and down of the boat slamming into the waves and the incessant rocking motion, plus the stench of diesel exhaust, I got motion sick and headed to my bunk to ride out the misery. At one point Norm cooked up some fresh salmon. I couldn't bear its smell, mingled with the diesel fumes, and tried to disappear into my mattress.

Though the sea was still rougher than a cob, Norm managed to get us ashore at our island but cracked his dinghy on the rocks as we leapt to the minimally welcoming tidal boundary. I staggered up a grassy hill -- the grass well over head high-- using clumps of it to pull myself up the steep slope. The island was heaving and rolling beneath my feet. Balance was out of the question for my battered inner ears. Mike soon left me behind and I did not see him again until it was time to leave.

The island was less than a mile wide and maybe two miles long. I had thought covering it was going to be easily accomplished, but I was very wrong.

Where the open grass ended, the forest began. It was a FOREST, virgin old growth rain forest. Never had I seen trees so huge. The wind was banished here. It was amazingly still. I stood in a cathedral. There were no paths, just rough looking green and brown punctuated by ferns and branches. I stepped in and after a handful of paces abruptly plummeted 10 feet through the deceptive cover, to find myself trapped between the horizontal trunks of two immense downed trees. Until I fell there was no indication this was not solid ground. It was impossible to climb out, so I made my way along the trunks till they narrowed and I was able to ascend from my wet, woody grave.





By careful and determined navigation, I managed to reach the island's crest and saw before me the east coast and unending water. I paused to absorb the magnificence of the churning ocean below.

The island had mercifully stopped moving and less vegetation here made my descent easier. As I edged down, I was startled when birds suddenly erupted at my feet. Puffins rocketed from their secure ground burrows and sped out to sea. I had never seen a puffin and delighted at their unexpected appearances.

At the bottom of the slope I found enormous boulders that provided little access to pass over or around them. No peregrine aeries were evident. Mike had vanished. My traverse had been for naught.

Carefully I made my way back over the island to our starting point.



Mike appeared, proudly bearing a fledgling peregrine. While we awaited our rescue from this magnificent island, Mike told me that he had seen this youngster perched atop one of the boulders on the island's east side. He was able to approach stealthily. Unseen, he then reached up and seized it. We both were overjoyed as we drank in the exquisiteness of the youngster.

Norm successfully returned us to the fishing boat, no small feat. Since it was still daytime and I had no bird, we asked Norm to cruise the island's east (quieter) side, glassing cliffs with binoculars, hoping to find another peregrine nest. Eventually we spotted a peale's falcon on a cliff. She flew off cackling at the approach of our boat. Ah, most likely an aerie.

It was drizzling now, and there was a light fog, but I asked Norm to put me ashore. With a climbing rope, minimal climbing equipment, and alone (Mike chose to stay aboard the boat), I found my way to climb to the ledge where the suspected nest should be. And that brings me back to where this story began. I crawled along the ledge, feeling extremely vulnerable and mortal, until I found a depression containing 3 eggs. Dang! Fledged birds from one nest and eggs less than a mile away in another. Not my day for a falcon. I gingerly descended and boarded Norm's boat.

Since we were running out of daylight, Norm headed back to another, larger island with a secure little cove on its leeward side, where we anchored for the night. Another fried salmon meal was our reward, and this time I was able to down it gratefully.

Next morning we headed back to Metlakatla. It was a much easier voyage back as the waves were lesser and the wind was at our backs. We caught a plane back to the states with Mike's young bird secured beneath our seats in a gold and blue Metlakatla beach bag. Mike's young Peale's tiercel became an excellent hunting bird and killed many ducks.

Although I did not fill my permit with a bird, I had known there were no guarantees or promises and, after all, it had been an adventure of a lifetime. Years later I learned Norm had gone down in his boat. 🦅

