

Peregrine Encounter

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Editor's note - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

It's a clear crisp late January afternoon at the Salton Sea in southern California. Two friends, and fellow bird photographers, are sitting by the side of an impoundment pond waiting for the occasional stilt or dowitcher to wander in close enough for a few frames. Not a lot of bird action, but as nature photographers are prone to do, the chit-chatting was fast and furious. What happened next will be engrained in our memories forever, a spectacle of nature that we could only dream of witnessing, much less capturing on digital film.

We had seen the Peregrine Falcon in the area multiple times in the preceding few days, mostly perched on a power pole scanning the area for its next victim. But this time our view would be much different. It was the sound that drew our attention first, the stoop of one of nature's fastest creatures. She passed us from behind, a mere few feet above our heads. The sound was incredible, and startling – like being at a military air show and having a jet on afterburner make an approach from behind the crowd. You see it before the sound reaches your brain, but it's the sound that gets your attention. Traveling at an incredible speed, and only inches above the water, she set her sights on a small group of Black-necked Stilts directly in front of us. The stilts probably never saw her coming and it was over for one bird in an instant. A quick hit from a lethal talon to the neck and the once placid feeding wader becomes a meal.

It is a time like this when, as a nature photographer, your many hours of practice and training have to take over. There is no time to think about it, you must react to the moment. Both of us were on the falcon from the instant of the kill as she labored to lift the stilt into the air. Shutters were screaming like the sounds of the other shorebirds in the pond. Luckily for us, she initially chose to exit the pond in our direction and we never wavered in tracking the action. A few struggling wing beats later and she flew out of view to reap the rewards of her skill as a hunter. The two photographers looked at each other, mouths agape for a few seconds, not believing what we had just seen. Then the photographer instinct kicked in again, causing some serious button pushing on the back of the camera to see if either of us had gotten anything usable. From what we could see in the tiny LCD we both knew that we had “nailed” it, and it was time for a few “high-fives” and happy words!

The hunter had circled behind us and landed on a power pole not too far away. Gathering our gear, the two of us quickly made our way down there hoping for a few frames of the feast. Never worrying in the least about us as we approached, she proceeded to devour the stilt in the last light of the evening. The sound of camera shutters continued to hammer as the sun slowly sank behind the distant mountains. All she left were two long legs discarded to the base of the pole.

We both agree that what we witnessed that evening was the most incredible nature experience of our lives. And to have captured images of the encounter from start to finish made it truly special. We hope that you will enjoy seeing a few glimpses from a special afternoon.



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