

Successful Kleptoparasitism by Crested Caracara of Peregrine Falcon

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The Crested Caracara (*Caracara plancus*) has a broad geographic distribution, ranging from South America to the southern United States (Morrison and Dwyer 2023, Smith and Dwyer 2024). This species is an opportunistic feeder with a diverse diet that includes both plant and animal matter, acquired through foraging, scavenging, and kleptoparasitism (Bent 1938, Rivera and Rodríguez 1997, Morrison and Dwyer 2023). Kleptoparasitism, otherwise known as piracy, food parasitism, pilfering, and robbery, involves one individual stealing food obtained by another (Rothschild and Clay 1952, Rand 1954, Meinertzhagen 1959, Hopkins and Wiley 1972, Hulsman 1976). Caracaras have been recorded kleptoparasitizing both conspecifics and a range of heterospecifics, including Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), *Corvus* sp., Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*), Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*), and Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*; Bent 1938, Hamilton 1981, Rodríguez-Estrella and Rivera-Rodríguez 1992, McNair et al. 2000, Sazima 2007, Buckley 2020).

Crested Caracaras are known for their skill and resourcefulness when pirating food. Glazener (1964) reports four instances of caracaras displacing Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) from carrion and pursuing them in flight until the vultures regurgitated their meals, which the caracaras then caught in mid-air. In a similar case, a caracara pursued a White-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albicaudatus*) until it dropped a lizard, which the caracara subsequently retrieved (Brown and Amadon 1968). Partida and Rodríguez-Estrella (2015)

documented a caracara kleptoparasitizing mammalian prey that had been impaled on a tree spine by a Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). Frederick and Bildstein (1992) also noted attempts, possibly successful, by Crested Caracaras to steal water beetles from either Scarlet Ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*) or Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*).

Natalia Fuentes and I observed a Crested Caracara successfully kleptoparasitizing a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) at 0900 on 7 January 2025 in St. Lucie County, Florida, USA. We observed an adult caracara perched on a metal structure before it flew approximately 2–5 m above the ground in an open agricultural field. It approached a peregrine that was flying ~2–4 m above the ground carrying prey in its talons. The prey item appeared to be a small, white wading bird, approximately the size of a Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*), although a definitive species identification was not possible.

The caracara closely pursued the peregrine in flight for ~160 m until the peregrine dropped its prey. During the chase, we did not detect vocalizations or physical contact between the two birds, and no agonistic behaviors were observed beyond the pursuit. The peregrine exhibited no evasive flight maneuvers or attempts to recover the dropped prey; instead, it continued flying away, gave a short series of rapid calls, then approached a second peregrine that was flying nearby. Both falcons subsequently flew east and out of sight.

The caracara landed on the ground and then flew ~610 m back to its original perch with the prey. It landed in the open, began plucking the wading bird, then carried it ~38 m to a cluster of cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*) where it was not seen again. This palm cluster was presumed to contain a nest

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based on several behaviors and signs: consistent visitation of the same palm by this individual and its probable mate over several weeks, presence of fecal whitewash, caching food near the tree, carrying of food items into the palm cluster, and known location of a nest there in previous years.

A thorough review of the literature revealed no published records of successful kleptoparasitism by Crested Caracara on Peregrine Falcons in North America. Searches conducted through JSTOR, SciELO, and Google Scholar databases using combinations of relevant keywords, including “Crested Caracara, caracara, carancho, Peregrine Falcon, peregrine, steal, piracy, pirate, kleptoparasitize, kleptoparasitism, klepto, cleptoparasitismo, clepto” yielded no results. In addition, I conducted targeted searches within several ornithological journals published in Spanish, including *El Hornero* and *Nuestras Aves* (Aves Argentinas/Asociación Ornitológica del Plata), *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* (BirdsCaribbean), *Ornitología Neotropical* (Neotropical Ornithological Society), *Ornithology Research* (Sociedade Brasileira de Ornitologia), *Zeledonia* (Asociación Ornitológica de Costa Rica), *Huitzil*, *Revista Mexicana de Ornitología* (Sociedad para el Estudio y Conservación de las Aves en México A.C.), *Ornitología Colombiana* (Asociación Colombiana de Ornitología), *Boletín de la Unión de Ornítólogos del Perú* (Unión de Ornítólogos del Perú), *Revista Ecuatoriana de Ornitología* (Red Aves Ecuador), *Revista Venezolana de Ornitología* (Unión Venezolana de Ornítólogos), *La Chiricoca* (Red de Observadores de Aves y Vida Silvestre de Chile), *Cotinga* (Neotropical Bird Club), *Revista Chilena de Ornitología I* (Unión de Ornítólogos de Chile). This extensive search yielded only two relevant records, both citizen science observations submitted to WikiAves, documenting agonistic interactions between Crested Caracara and Peregrine Falcon. These observations were reviewed and classified as kleptoparasitism interactions by Schneider et al. (2023). However, both records lack critical details. One was described by the observer simply as “fighting,” without further context and the other included a brief note suggesting that the caracara attempted to steal food from the peregrine, though it was unclear whether the attempt was successful.

Kleptoparasitism by birds of prey is thought to be influenced by several factors, including food availability and type, prey visibility, and the local abundance of the host species (Brockmann and Barnard 1979). In this observation, Peregrine Falcons are considered uncommon winter visitors to the region, making it unlikely that host density played a significant role. However, the peregrine’s prey, a relatively large, bright white wading bird, was likely highly conspicuous and may

have been easily detected by the Crested Caracara. Brockmann and Barnard (1979) suggest that mobbing behavior can cause a host to drop its prey; however, no mobbing behavior was observed in this instance, either by the caracara or other birds.

The open agricultural landscape where this event occurred may have further facilitated kleptoparasitism by enhancing prey visibility for the bird in pursuit and limiting escape options for the bird being chased (i.e., the host; Paulson 1985). Although peregrines are agile and strong fliers, the energetic cost of defending and transporting prey may, under certain circumstances, outweigh the benefits of retaining it, especially if the cost of avoidance or escape is high (Riechert 1988). In this case, the falcon’s decision to abandon the prey without exhibiting strong defensive or evasive behaviors suggests that yielding the food may have been energetically advantageous.

Although the nonbreeding range of Peregrine Falcons overlaps widely with Crested Caracaras, I found only two citizen science reports documenting kleptoparasitism between these two species, both from Brazil and none from North America. The scarcity of records may be due to the generally low density of Peregrine Falcons across much of their nonbreeding range, which would reduce the frequency of interactions with Crested Caracaras and the likelihood of such events being observed. It is also possible that additional instances of kleptoparasitism by caracaras targeting Peregrine Falcons exist but remain undocumented in peer-reviewed literature or major databases. This may be particularly true in Latin America, where the Crested Caracara’s range is substantially broader and the potential for such interactions is presumably greater.

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