

Peregrine Falcon

Taxonomy:

Class: Aves

Order: Ciconiiformes

Family: Falconidae

Genus: Falco

Species: peregrinus

Measurements:

Body Length: 15-19 inches

Wing span: 39-42 inches

Weight: about 2 pounds; males lighter than females

Identification

The peregrine falcon is about the size of a crow, but with long pointed wings and a long narrow tail. When perched, the wings reach the end of the tail. Its quick wingbeats are a trait of falcons. Males and females have the same plumage. Adults have a black cap and black sideburns, slate gray on the back with faint barring mostly on the lower breast, and gray and white bands on a thin tail. Immature peregrines are dark brown on the back with buff edges on their wing feathers and dark streaking over the entire breast.

Breeding

Males and females mate for life with females doing almost all of the brooding and incubation. Peregrines nest on the ledge of a cliff or building. (e.g. Fermi Lab building) The nest may be 12 inches in diameter and 1-2 inches deep. It is simply a depression scraped in the earth. April incubation of the 3-4 eggs, rounded, cream colored with brown /red blotches, lasts 28-33 days, followed by a fledgling phase of at least 6 weeks. The males bring food to the nest for the female and the young. At times the food, a variety of birds from sparrows and doves to ducks, is left on a nearby perch or transferred in midair to the female and fledglings. Peregrines attack and kill their prey in midair, and retrieve their prey in midair as well as on the ground. They cruise at 40-55 mph in level flight, hunt at 70mph (as fast as a cheetah) and it has been estimated that in a vertical dive from 5,000 feet they can reach speeds of 230-240 mph. When flying at such high speeds, the impact of their talons on their prey results in an immediate kill. Peregrines can live up to 17 years in the wild.

Range

Peregrines nest on cliffs, ledges, and sometimes in a broken hollowed section of a tree top.

They are found on every continent, except Antarctica.

Habitat

Peregrines choose their habitat wherever their prey, birds, are plentiful. This includes meadows, mudflats, beaches, marshes, and lakes.

Migration

With the exception of a few populations of permanent residents on the West Coast and in the Rocky Mountain area, peregrines are migratory. In North America, they fly south in September and October from Canada and Alaska and return in April and May. Most routes appear to be along the coast, but some travel inland, going as far south as Central and South America. During migration they fly singly.

Conservation Status

Peregrines were placed on the endangered list in 1970 and removed in 1999. In the 1940s DDT, a chemical used to control insects became widespread. Smaller birds ate the insects and in turn were eaten by the peregrines transferring the chemical's deleterious results. The chemical inhibited the female's ability to transport and redistribute calcium, which was needed in hardening egg shells. Infected females either stopped laying eggs or their thin eggshells broke during incubation, resulting in no additions to the populations of peregrines. DDT was banned in the US in 1972 and populations of peregrines began to slowly increase.

References

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Steve Dome, 11/7/2004