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Peregrine falcon — a success story

By Ron Jurek

Recently, a young peregrine falcon took up residence in downtown Sacramento, selecting as one of its feeding perches the Resources Building, headquarters home of the Department of Fish and Game. Downtown pigeons probably attracted it here. Laws, regulations, funding, and conservation actions provided through the state government offices in Sacramento over the past two decades helped bring this bird into existence.

The color band on its leg shows that it had been hatched in captivity and released to the wild at some remote site, perhaps hundreds of miles from Sacramento, as part of an intensive program to restore the population of this swift, sleek falcon to a secure status. Nesting peregrines had not too many years ago nearly disappeared from California. Photos by Bob Eplett



The peregrine falcon depicted on California's first Native Species Stamp, is a crow-sized raptor that feeds almost exclusively on other birds. Pigeons are common fare, but peregrines will feed on birds as small as warblers or as large as gulls. This extremely fast-flying, fast-diving falcon with long, pointed wings normally captures its quarry in flight or knocks it to the ground, then carries it to a favored feeding perch, or to its nesting site.

The peregrine was a common species in California early this century, typically nesting on ledges of cliff faces. The pesticide DDT, which was heavily used after World War II, entered the peregrine's food chain. The contamination affected the quality of peregrine eggshells; shells became so thin that eggs easily broke or failed to hatch. This problem was a worldwide one for other populations and subspecies of this falcon and for many other species of birds. Peregrines soon became an endangered species. By the mid-1970s, fewer than 10 known nesting pairs bred in California, where once there may have been hundreds.

Intensive conservation efforts were instituted in the 1970s, including the important restriction on use of DDT. Federal and state agencies, together with private sector support, developed recovery programs, protected breeding birds and their nesting habitats, and funded research and management activities.

The Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group, affiliated with the University of California and with The Peregrine Fund, bred peregrines in captivity and collected thin-shelled eggs laid by wild peregrines, and then hatched large numbers of young peregrines for release to the wild. Similar programs have been implemented elsewhere in North America.

From 1977 to 1988, more than 500 young peregrines were released in California and nearby states to aug-

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ment the natural production of young by wild breeding pairs. Special release methods have been used, such as placing chicks hatched in captivity into active nests of wild peregrines ("fostering") or of prairie falcons ("cross-fostering"), or into artificial nests ("hacking") in areas where peregrines no longer breed. Hack sites are normally selected in areas with cliffs, but a building in Los Angeles was used for a time as an "urban cliff" release site.

Once the young peregrines learn to feed on their own, they may range widely for hundreds of miles. It may take two or three years for them to establish their own nesting territories. The growing numbers of young peregrines fledged naturally in the wild or released as part of the recovery program are showing up in more and more places, as young travelers and later as first-time breeders.

The recovery programs are making good progress — peregrine populations are growing annually. More than 80 breeding pairs now nest in California. State and federal agencies throughout the United States are encouraged by this population recovery and will be closely evaluating the trend in coming years to determine whether the species should be reclassified from its endangered status. This is a conservation success story, and that young peregrine on the buildings of Sacramento is part of it. 🐾



Ron Jurek is a wildlife biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game's endangered birds and mammals program.

Photographer Bob Eplett and a peregrine falcon, both perched atop a 17-story building in Sacramento. DFG photo by Dave Dick.