

PEREGRINE FALCON *Falco peregrinus*

Order: Falconiformes

Family: Falconidae

Genus: Falco

Species: peregrinus

The name peregrine is derived from the latin "peregrinari" and means to journey from a foreign place or a wanderer. This is a fitting name as some Peregrine Falcons migrate further than most other birds, some fly as far as 25,000 km (15,500 miles) during a year.

Other names: Duck Hawk

Characteristics

Peregrines are roughly the size of a crow. Females have a size range of 46-54 cm (18-21 inches) long. Males are smaller with a size range of 38-46 cm (15-18 inches) long. Their wingspan is 102-114.75 cm (40-45 inches).

Peregrines have a dark, slate gray back with light, flecked undersides and a black head, with a black wedge extending below the eyes. Eyes are dark brown with yellow eye rings. Legs and feet are yellow.

Similar species are: Gyrfalcons which are larger and lighter coloured, Prairie falcons which are paler and have more brown, American Kestrels which are much smaller and have 2 facial stripes, and Merlins which are smaller, slimmer and have only a light facial stripe.

Most of the falcons are silent except near their nests. Peregrines make a rasping kek, kek, kek, call; Prairie falcons a yelping kik kik kik; Kestrels a rapid high klee klee klee; Merlins a shrill ki ki ki.

Lifecycle

Peregrines usually begin breeding at two to three years old. They generally mate for life, but will go through a courtship ritual each spring. The males court the females with acrobatic flying, repeated calls and offerings of food.

The male shows the female several potential nest spots and she selects one of these in which to lay her eggs. Nest sites are most commonly located on a rocky ledge. Usually the nest is quite minimal, just a shallow depression with no added material. Peregrines will also nest on tall buildings in cities. Occasionally abandoned nests in trees or cavities will be used.

The size of breeding territory varies greatly, likely depending on how much food is available. Peregrines will defend areas of less than 1 kilometre (2/3 of a mile) where food is abundant to over 20 kilometres (12 miles) where food is scarce.

A typical nest contains 3 to 4 eggs. Incubation lasts from 33 to 35 days, during which the eggs are seldom left uncovered.

Peregrines grow from helpless down covered chicks with big feet to adult sized birds in about 6 weeks. Before attempting to fly peregrine chicks usually spend hours sitting on the edge of the nest ledge flapping their wings, or running back and forth on the ledge, as if trying to work up the courage to jump.

Different studies suggest average life spans for Peregrines from as little as 4-5 years to up to 10-12 years. Mortality in the first year is between 60-80%, and declines each year after that. The periods just after fledging and during their first migration are the riskiest times for young Peregrines.

Habitat

Peregrines are widely distributed worldwide, being found on every continent except Antarctica. They occur over most of North America except for the Great Plains and the southeast corner of the United States.

There are three subspecies of Peregrine Falcons in North America, each with a different range. Peale's subspecies occurs in coastal areas from Alaska to Oregon. The Tundra subspecies lives in the boreal forest and tundra of Alaska and the Canadian Arctic during the summer and migrates to Central and South America in the winter. The Anatum subspecies covers the rest of North America. Many Anatum birds are now hybrids with the other 2 subspecies due to captive breeding programs over the past 20 years. Most Anatum birds migrate to the southeastern United States and coastal regions of Mexico although some, especially urban birds, remain in their summer range year round.

Peregrines prefer open areas such as coasts, wetlands, alpine areas and tundra, where they can hunt easily. Nesting sites are typically rocky ledges that are high off the ground, sheltered and near good hunting grounds.

Increasingly Peregrines are moving into cities and will use bridges or tall buildings as nesting sites.

Behavior

Peregrines are among the fastest raptors, or birds of prey. Their average cruising speed is 40-55 km/hr (25-34 miles/hr) and they can reach speeds of over 110 km/hr (68 miles/hr) when hunting.

Peregrines primarily eat small to medium sized birds that they strike and capture in mid-air. Occasionally peregrines will also eat small mammals, amphibians and insects. When peregrines hunt they go into a steep dive or stoop, attaining speeds of up to 320 km/hr (200 miles/hr), usually killing their prey instantly when they strike it. They most commonly hunt at dawn and dusk.

During incubation and when chicks are very young the male does most of the hunting, while the female stays on the nest. As the chicks grow and need more food the female joins in the hunting. Due to her larger size the female can catch larger prey species and is therefore a more efficient hunter.

Those Peregrines that migrate typically leave their breeding grounds in September, and return in March. Roughly one month is spent flying each way.

Threats

For over three thousand years Peregrines have been trained by humans as hunting birds and were held in high esteem in many cultures. Then, a few hundred years ago Peregrines and many other birds of prey began to be extensively hunted because they were considered a threat to livestock and game birds such as grouse.

More recently pesticide use further decreased populations. The Anatum Peregrine Falcon of the prairies was the most severely affected and was almost wiped out during the 1960's by the use of the pesticide DDT. DDT was sprayed on crops, and it accumulated in the tissue of birds that eat seeds. When Peregrines ate these birds they ingested high concentrations of the pesticide. The pesticide caused the Peregrines to produce thin-shelled eggs that broke easily so few chicks hatched. By 1970 just 90 Anatum Peregrines remained in Canada.

What we can do to help

Peregrine populations are now recovering due to restrictions on the use of DDT, intensive reintroduction and captive breeding programs. The status of the Peregrine Falcon in Canada has been downgraded to threatened from endangered because populations have increased to more healthy levels. Peregrines are still endangered in parts of the United States. DDT is still used in Central and South America, so Peregrines that winter in these areas or feed on migratory birds that winter in these areas are still at risk of poisoning. The Canadian Peregrine Foundation conducts monitoring, research and recovery programs to help protect the Peregrine Falcon. In the United States several state sponsored research and recovery programs are in place to assist Peregrine populations.

Conclusion

Peregrines are crow-sized, dark coloured birds of prey. They are fast fliers and skillful hunters of smaller birds. Peregrines live in open areas where they can hunt easily. Populations fell to very low levels by the 1970s due pesticide use and hunting. Since that time restrictions on the use of pesticides and captive breeding programs have increased populations to sustainable levels in much of North America.

References

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The Canadian Peregrine Foundation. www.peregrine-foundation.ca

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: All about birds

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Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/er/factsheets/birds/falcon.htm