Press Release

The Peregrine Falcon Is Back!

Babbitt Announces Proposal to Removal World's Fastest Bird from Endangered Species List

[Editor's Note: The recent delisting from endangered status of the Peregrine Falcon is a particularly significant event for the avicultural community. The successful reestablishment of this once critically endangered species back into its former range demonstrates the valuable role captive propagation can play in avian conservation. It was primarily through the leadership and dedicated efforts over the last 28 years by The Peregrine Fund that the rescue of this species occurred.

In recognition of their conservation achievements, the American Federation of Aviculture proudly awarded Honorary Life Memberships to the five founding members of the Peregrine Fund during the 1997 AFA convention in San Antonio, Texas.]

The world's fastest bird has pulled out of a dive toward extinction and once again is soaring. The peregrine falcon is expected to be removed from the endangered species list according to a proposal announced today by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, marking one of the most dramatic success stories of the Endangered Species Act.

"Every American should be proud," Babbitt said. "In 25 years, the people of the United States have rescued this awesome raptor from the brink of extinction. We have proved that a strong Endangered Species Act can make a difference. We don't have to stand idly by and watch our wildlife go extinct. We can bring species back. We have proved it with the peregrine falcon."

The peregrine once ranged throughout much of North America from the subarctic boreal forests of Alaska and Canada south to Mexico. A medium-sized raptor, the falcon nests on tall cliffs or urban skyscrapers and hunts other birds for food, reaching speeds of 200 miles an hour as it dives after its prey.

While those nesting in the lower latitudes travel shorter distances, if at all, peregrines nesting in Alaska and Canada are well known for their long spring and fall migratory flights to and from wintering areas in Latin and South America.

The bird's remarkable speed and agility, however, could do nothing to prevent its sharp decline after World War II when widespread use of the pesticide DDT and other organocholorine pesticides decimated populations.

The pesticide DDT caused peregrines to lay thin-shelled eggs that break during incubation. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers, learning of studies being conducted in Great Britain on the link between DDT and egg shell thinning, confirmed these findings on peregrines in the United States.

Rachel Carson, a former Service employee, helped alert the public to the hazards of pesticides on wildlife in 1962 when she published her book *Silent Spring.* Ten years later, the Environmental Protection Agency took the historic and at the time, very controversial step of banning the use of DDT in the United States, which was the first step on the road to recovery for the peregrine.

In 1970, the Service listed the American peregrine falcon as endangered under the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, the predecessor of the current law, when the population in the eastern United States was wiped out and the populations in the west had declined by as much as 80 to 90 percent below historical levels. By 1975, the population reached an all time low of 324 nesting pairs in North America.

The banning of DDT made the recovery of the peregrine falcon possible. But the protections provided by the Endangered Species Act and the extraordinary efforts of the Service, in partnership with state wildlife agencies, universities, private ornithological groups, and individuals, accelerated the pace of recovery through captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts and the protection of nest sites during the breeding season. Similar efforts took place in Canada, where the Canadian Wildlife Service and Provincial agencies took the lead in a major captive breeding and reintroduction program.

Currently, there are at least 1,593 peregrine breeding pairs in the United States and Canada, well above the overall recovery goal of 631 pairs.

"It would have been hard to imagine this day back in the 1970s when there were so few peregrines left, but it shows how effective a law the Endangered Species Act is when allowed to work as it was intended," Babbitt said.

Although a final determination to delist the peregrine would remove it from the Act's protection, it would still be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The MBTA prohibits the taking, killing, possession, transportation, and importation of migratory birds, their eggs, parts, and nests except when specifically authorized by the Interior Department, such as in the case of regulated hunting seasons for game birds.

In addition, the Service will work with state wildlife agencies to monitor the status of the species for a minimum of five years, as required by the Endangered Species Act. If it becomes evident during this period that the bird again needs the Act's protection, the Service would relist the species. Secretary Babbitt announced the proposal to delist the peregrine falcon at Stone Mountain Park near Atlanta, Georgia. Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark made a simultaneous announcement of the proposal at The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. Founded in 1970 at Cornell University, the Fund helped lead the way toward recovery with a highly successful captive breeding program.

Overall, government and private raptor experts have reintroduced more than 6,000 falcons into the wild since 1974. Some of the reintroductions took place in urban areas after researchers discovered that the falcons have successfully adapted to nesting on skyscrapers where they can hunt pigeons and starlings.

State wildlife agencies also played a fundamental role in the recovery process by protecting nesting habitat, carrying out releases, and monitoring populations within their borders. "The recovery of the peregrine has been a model of partnership in the conservation and recovery of an endangered species," Clark said. "Our agency could never have reached this day by ourselves. We needed the help of many organizations and individuals to bring about the recovery."