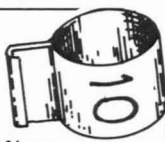


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Peregrine Falcon Recovery

by Phyllis R. Dague

In 1970 **The Peregrine Fund** began a long-term research program at Cornell University to learn how to propagate Peregrines and other rare falcons, in hope that eventually the progeny could be used to bolster the remnant wild populations in the West and to restore the species to its vacated breeding range in the East. Today **The Peregrine Fund** program has breeding lofts located not only in Ithaca, N.Y., but also in Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, with total capacity for housing about 80 pairs of falcons. We currently have more than 130 Peregrines in these facilities, including both wild-caught and captive-produced individuals. We produced our first 20 Peregrines at Cornell in 1973, and since then have raised a total of 434 young from 46 females through the

1979 breeding season. More than 100 of these youngsters came from just three exceptionally productive pairs.

We have now introduced 341 young Peregrines into the wild by hacking, fostering to wild Peregrine parents, and by cross-fostering to Prairie Falcons in 16 states: California, Colorado, Idaho, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Experimental work on the release and establishment of captive produced Peregrines by hacking began in a small way in 1974, expanded significantly in 1975, and continued to increase in scope through 1979. Hacking is a process whereby the young birds are brought into

Young Peregrine Falcon in a hack box. Soon he will be weaned to taking food on his own.

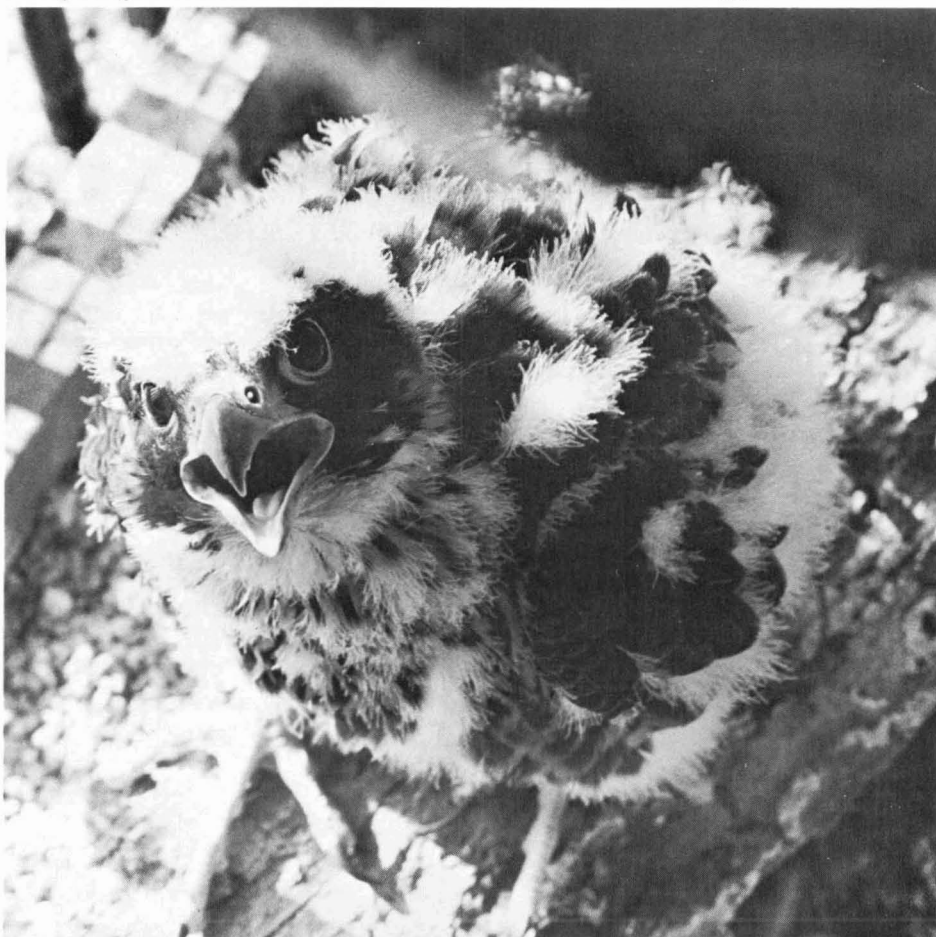


photo courtesy of Cornell University

the wild one week before fledging. They are handfed at the hacking station and then gradually weaned to taking birds on their own for food.

If we can continue on our present course, the next five years will certainly see the establishment of some breeding pairs of Peregrines in the eastern United States and an increase in the number of productive eyries in the West. Success in these efforts will depend upon the cooperation of many diverse groups and individuals that have a concern for the recovery of the Peregrine.

This year in our propagation efforts we broke the 100 mark in the number of young peregrines raised in our combined programs at Fort Collins and Cornell — 110 young came from eggs laid in captivity and 19 from wild eggs hatched in our incubators.

At Cornell 21 females laid a total of 177 eggs, of which 136 could have been fertilized; 107 eggs were actually fertile, 71 of them hatched (66%), and 57 hatchlings survived to achieve full development. The comparable figures for Fort Collins are: 24 egg-laying females, a total of 139 eggs laid, 80 that had a chance of fertilization, 75 fertile, 58 (77%) hatched, and 53 young raised. Twelve new females laid eggs for the first time. An additional three were produced in Wyoming and New Mexico.

Release work in the East started early this year with the fostering of young to Baltimore's Scarlett in early May. Field operations continued from there through six states from Virginia to New Hampshire with a final shut down of the last site in New York during the first week of September. Fifty-seven young were put out into the field in the east, only twelve (21%) were lost, making this the lowest mortality suffered thus far.

As ironic as it sounds, success itself has caused some problems. Returning Peregrines from seasons past set up territories around their former hack sites. Some tolerate the hacked fledglings and join in eating the food which is provided, but others aggressively chase the juveniles. Such aggression can be challenging for a youngster during its maiden flight, and two fledglings were chased off beyond tracking range and were lost before they could learn their way back.

Western workers released peregrines in six states. In addition to Colorado, New Mexico, and Idaho where we have ongoing projects, we extended our activities into Utah, Nebraska, and South Dakota. Fifty-seven young were released by one of the three methods. Twenty-five young were fostered into wild peregrine nests, but only 12 (48%) survived to fly from the eyries. Seventeen nestlings were cross-

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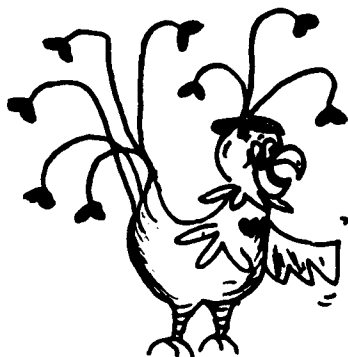
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fostered to nesting pairs of prairie falcons; only 5 (29%) survived. Fifteen young were hacked at cliffs or at a tower, and 14 (93%) survived to the stage of independent hunters. Natural predators — golden eagles and great horned owls — accounted for most of the losses, which were unusually high by comparison with previous years.

Each year lone Peregrines surviving from previous years return to some of the release sites. This year, in addition to the four pairs of falcons that occupied sites in the east, eight individual Peregrines were present at other eastern locales, and one falcon returned to a new western hacking location in Colorado. As many as six falcons may have to be released by hacking in order to produce one returnee; therefore these lone, returning falcons represent a great deal of laboratory and field work, as well as a long but successful run through the gauntlet of natural selection.

This spring, for the first time in more than 20 years, Peregrine Falcons paired, mated, and laid eggs at eyries in the eastern United States. Last year we had the formation of a pair of released Peregrines at a site in the New Jersey wetlands in mid-summer, after the normal mating season; and we also had Scarlett, the female that had taken up a permanent territory in downtown Baltimore, where she established her eyrie on the ledge at the 33rd floor level of the USF&G home office building. All through the winter we waited to see what these falcons would do in 1979. As March, the normal time for pairing, passed, no falcons had taken up residence at the New Jersey towers, and no mate had appeared in Baltimore for Scarlett. We began to fear there would be no breeding by our released falcons again in 1979.

We decided to try to provide a male for Scarlett, for she indicated by her nest-scraping behavior and other signs that she would soon come into breeding con-

dition. On a building across the street, a flat roof offered a convenient location within Scarlett's daily view to set up a cage for housing a prospective mate. By the middle of March the cage had been constructed, and on the 19th we placed an 11-year-old, falconry trained tiercel named Blue Meanie inside. Our attendant began a daily vigil of care and observations that lasted well into June. The idea was to see whether the two birds would establish a pair-bond while the Blue Meanie was confined, so that on release, he would be attracted to Scarlett and would remain in the city as her mate. Scarlett very quickly discovered the tiercel in his cage and made frequent visits to him to take the quail and pigeons the attendant left as an enticement on an outside shelf. Scarlett showed much interest in the Blue Meanie, calling and wailing to him. Once he offered her a quail through the bars, but otherwise he did not return her favors.

On April 4 Scarlett laid the first Peregrine egg to be seen in the outdoors east of the Mississippi River in more than 20 years. On April 7 she laid a second egg, and we knew that if our plan was to have any chance for success, we would have to set the Blue Meanie free before Scarlett completed her clutch and began steady incubation. Released from the cage, he flew up and at once joined Scarlett in the air; soaring together wing tip to wing tip, they disappeared around the other side of the building. Our hope began to rise with them, but in about ten minutes Scarlett reappeared alone. The Blue Meanie was gone and never seen again! A second, captive produced tiercel released later in the season was also unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Scarlett laid her third and final egg and began incubation.

After allowing Scarlett to incubate full term, we substituted some downy young falcons from Cornell for her to mother. She performed her parental duties well, catching much of the food for the nestlings herself, and she successfully fledged two males and two females. Thanks to a sympathetic press and to the informed and tolerant citizens of Baltimore, Scarlett has already become one of the most famous Peregrines in history, rivaling her Canadian counterpart, the Sun Life Falcon of Montreal.

With so much of our attention fixed on Scarlett, we were unaware of some exciting events taking place in New Jersey. When one of our coastal field assistants checked on the condition of the towers and scouted for any great horned owls lurking in the nearby woods,

he found pairs of Peregrines at all three towers! One pair consisted of an old male from previous years with a year old female. At the other two towers the male and the female were first year birds, a remarkable fact in itself, as we know of no instances in which an immature male and female have paired together in a wild population.

Mating was soon observed between the old male and his female, and she seemed to be spending much time inside the nest box on top of the tower. By the second week in May the female was remaining inside the box most of the day and could be seen sitting on a scrape and it looked like full incubation had begun. After ten days our egg-candling expert from Cornell, climbed up the tower to take a look. He found two well incubated eggs that appeared under the portable candler to be developing. Our first fertile eggs laid by a released Peregrine, and by an immature female at that!

Life is more difficult for Peregrines in the New Jersey salt marshes than it is inside our breeding chambers at Cornell. Not only must they catch all of their own food, but they must also protect their eggs and young from predators. Fish crows and common crows are frequent around the coastal towers, and they soon become attracted to the tidbits of food left from the falcons' meals. The crows quickly learned how to find and rob the tiercels' food caches on the marsh. The enraged tiercel attacked these crows unmercifully when they entered the airspace around his nest tower or food caches. Since there is very little cover for the crows to escape into, twice the crows actually flew inside the nest box to hide. The female quickly dispatched these intruders from the tower but these experiences obviously disturbed her, and we began to fear for her eggs.

A few days before the eggs were expected to hatch, the female began spending abnormally long and more frequent periods off the nest. This change in behavior was not a good sign. We decided to climb up for another look. The two eggs were gone — not a trace remained. We did find an intact but cracked egg on the ground below the tower. There is no way to know for sure what happened, even though an attendant was on site the entire time. We think the egg on the ground was a third egg (probably the first laid) and not one of the two we originally found in the scrape. Its contents are being analyzed for DDE and other residues to give us a hint about the level of chemical contamination the Peregrines are subjected to in the New Jersey salt marshes.

photo by Tom L. Maechtle/Cornell University

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Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus anatum*

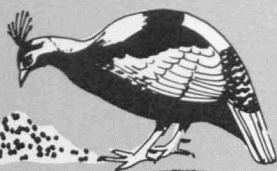


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Scarlett and her foster young on the 33rd floor level of the USF&G home office building in Baltimore. She successfully fledged two males and two females.

The other two pairs in New Jersey did not mate or lay eggs, but they did engage in much courtship behavior, and they remained on territory through the summer. In addition, we had sightings of a least eight other individual Peregrines from previous years at locations from Virginia to New Hampshire.

No doubt remains that breeding pairs of Peregrines can be established by the hacking procedure, as long as a sufficient number of birds can be released in a given region. Each year since 1975 the population of released falcons has been slowly building in the east, and it appears that a sufficient density of falcons has now been reached so that pairs can be formed and maintained with some

stability. In our report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last year, we predicted that by 1980 there should be three or four breeding pairs of Peregrines in the eastern United States. Our results this summer, especially with yearlings, encourage us to think there might be even more.

Reference: Cade, T.J. and P.R. Dague, 1978-79, *The Peregrine Fund Newsletter*, No. 6 & 7.

Note: *The Peregrine Fund* is a non-profit fund to aid the Peregrine Falcon. A substantial portion of this money comes from donations of individuals and private conservation groups. All contributions are tax deductible. For more information write *The Peregrine Fund*, Lab of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 14850.

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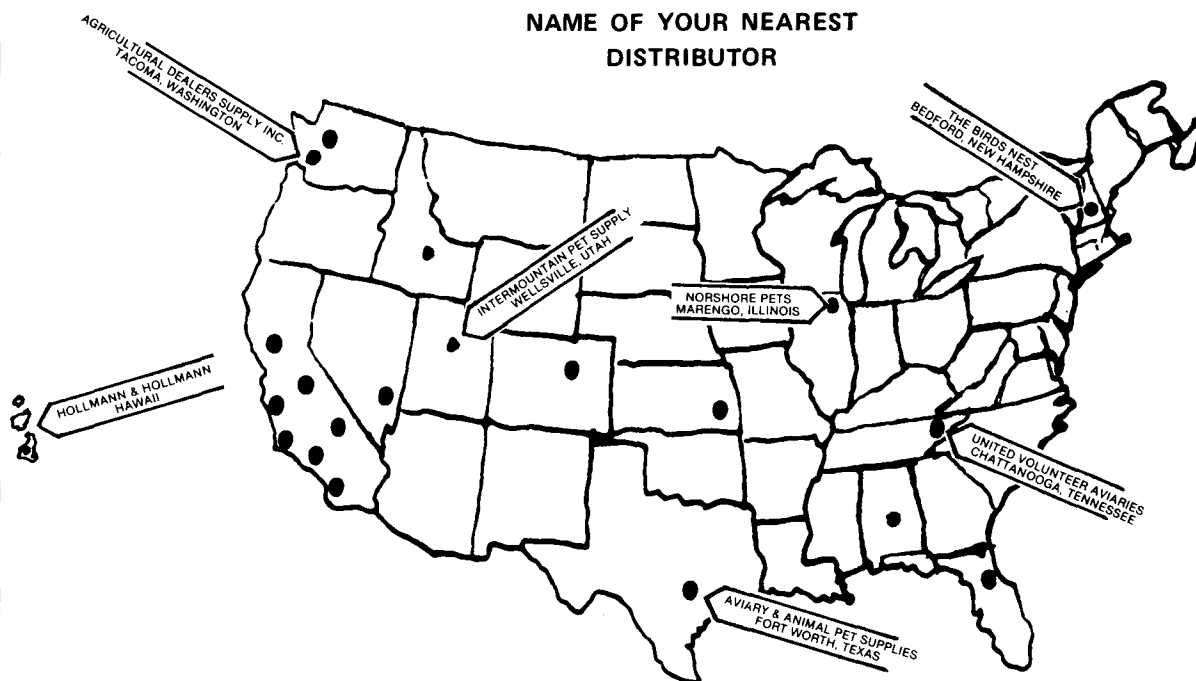
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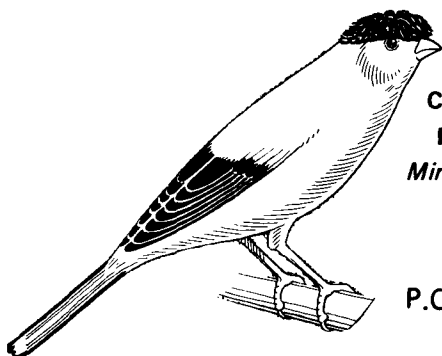
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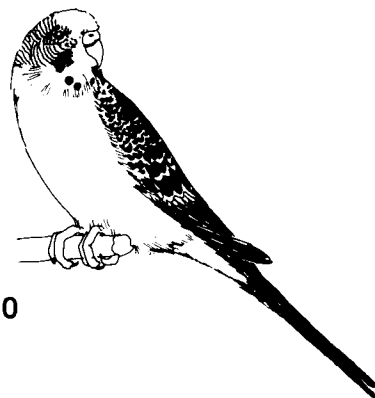
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