

[From Summer 2001]

The Peregrine Falcon

The peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) is considered by many to be one of the most successful comeback stories of our time. In the 1930's and 1940's, there were an estimated 1,500 breeding pairs in North America. Due to the use of pesticides like DDT, population counts were seriously depleted. DDT caused the eggshells to be extremely thin, resulting in their breakage during incubation. By the mid-1960's, the peregrine falcon population had seriously declined throughout the United States.

In 1970, the peregrine falcon was added to the endangered species list. Fourteen years later it was removed from the endangered species list and placed on the threatened species list. Then in August of 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed it from the threatened list as well -- a remarkable comeback. There are now an estimated 2,000-5,000 breeding pairs in North America.

These magnificent raptors have a wingspan of about forty inches. The adults have blue-gray wings with black bars across their back, pale undersides, and white faces with a black strip on each cheek. The juvenile falcons are a darker brown underneath. They prefer mountain ranges, river valleys, and coastlines as nesting sites. These nests, called eyries, are usually scrapes or depressions dug in gravel on a cliff ledge. Occasionally peregrines will nest in tree cavities, a building ledge, or even a bridge. They have been known to vigorously protect their nest, but may abandon them if harassed.

The female usually lays a clutch of 3-5 eggs and will incubate them for approximately 32-34 days.

During this time, the male does all the hunting. Once the chicks are a little older, the female joins in on the hunt for food.

Peregrine falcons feed primarily on other birds. They will soar high above the ground until their unsuspecting prey is sighted. Then they will dive at an estimated 200 mph striking their prey with a sharp blow in mid-air.

Here on the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge, we are doing our part in the recovery of the peregrine falcon. On Fisherman Island there is a manmade hocking tower occupied by a nesting pair. Through observation and close monitoring, we are tracking the progress of the pair. Currently they have a clutch of four eggs which are in the incubation period. Once the chicks have hatched, they will be fitted with radio transmitters and their movements tracked live on the internet at:

<http://www.dom.com/about/enviromnent/falcon/>

The success of the peregrine falcon is a consequence of the cooperation of many people working together. Scientists, biologists, and others have come together to provide unlimited possibilities for the peregrine falcon to flourish for years to come.

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