

Crater Lake's Peregrine Falcon Challenge: A Soap Opera on the Cliffs

By Jim Milestone

Strong winds and blowing snow forced site attendant Brent Hetzler to retreat from his peregrine nest site observation point back to his remote cabin. It was 4:30 pm on May 2, 1988, and the female peregrine had been tucked back against the volcanic cliffs of Crater Lake's caldera wall all afternoon. She was brooding over the three down-covered chicks that were hatched on the ledge two weeks earlier. The storm precipitated over a foot of powder snow throughout that night in a series of flurries that crossed Crater Lake.

Some time that evening disaster struck. Under the veil of darkness and in the confusion of the blowing snow, an owl probably swooped in and killed the adult female and three chicks. The next morning Brent returned to his observation point only to find the lone adult male calling for his mate. "I looked through my scope and there was nothing there," Hetzler said. "All you could see was the empty ledge and some of the female's back feathers." A thorough investigation failed to locate the three chicks but the adult female's half eaten carcass was found 100 yards from the nest site at the base of the cliff.

This was bad news for Hetzler and for the staff of Crater Lake NP. It meant that Brent's efforts to protect the nest site for the past two months in the icy winds and snow had been in vain. "It was like losing family for me," Hetzler said. "I had been watching this pair since the year before." It also meant that the park had lost a successful restoration of naturally breeding falcons, the first in nine years.

In 1979, peregrine falcons nested for the last time without the assistance of man at Crater Lake NP. The lost site is the last natural eyrie in the state of Oregon. Since that time, the park's ranger staff, with assistance from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and the Predatory Bird Research Group (PBRG) in Santa Cruz, Calif. had been introducing, or hacking, young peregrine chicks into the park. Chicks flown in from the PBRG Center are allowed to mature in a hack box on the caldera wall. Fresh frozen quail are

thawed out daily and brought to the nest early in the morning before the young peregrines can see the site attendants. When the chicks are old enough to fly, the hack box is opened and the falcons take the big leap. This program has worked successfully at Crater Lake from 1983 thru 1986, with the release of 10 peregrine chicks during that time.

In 1987 and 1988, at least one of the chicks released returned to nest in the caldera. The adult male peregrine – recognized by the band on his leg – linked up with a wild female falcon. In 1987, the female laid four eggs at the caldera eyrie. The clutch of eggs was removed and replaced by two captively bred chicks. The eggs removed from the nest were incubated by PBRG and produced three young chicks; a fourth egg was added. The egg shells revealed an 18 percent thinning, resulting from industrial compounds (DDE and PCB). According to Lee Aulman of PBRG, "The peregrine falcon is a sponge for environmental contaminants."

In 1987, the adult peregrines raised the two introduced chicks without any problems, until the night before the chicks were to fledge. That evening an owl swooped in and took one of the young. The remaining young falcon successfully fledged the nest and was seen flying along the rim of Crater Lake all summer with its parents.

With a track record like the one described above, one can imagine the frustration of those involved with the recovery program to see nature allow an owl to take an endangered species for dinner, especially from a family of peregrines that are a product of a nine year effort. The loss of peregrine falcons by other predators has been occurring at Crater Lake for centuries. It is only because of man's dependency on pesticides that the simple act of an owl, one snowy evening, turns this scene into a real tragedy for everyone involved.

The owl's return in 1988 to take not one, but three chicks and the prized adult female was a serious blow to the program. However, Park Ranger Jim Webster quickly developed an alternative plan. Having lost the oppor-



Hero of the peregrine soap opera, Brent Hetzler (center), is shown here with NPS Ranger Jim Webster (right), and Ralph Opp, a wildlife biologist with the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Dept., discussing plans for the next exciting episode.



Just call me Bigfoot might be the peregrine falcon chick's comment as it waits with its sibling in the carrying box before being planted in the prairie falcon nest on the caldera rim at Crater Lake. (Photo by Jim Milestone)

tunity to have the peregrines produce naturally, Ranger Webster arranged for ODFW and PBRG to respond with two new captively bred chicks. It was decided to cross foster the young with a neighboring pair of prairie falcons just across the caldera. The prairie falcon nest contained five young, which were removed and sent to another prairie falcon nest in southern Oregon. The prairie falcon adults quickly took charge of the new chicks and began to feed the young peregrines in the safety of their pothole, 200 feet above Crater Lake.

In late June the adopted peregrines fledged the prairie falcon nest and performed spectacular aerial displays for site attendant Hetzler, who had been watching this drama for three months. Meanwhile, on the far side of the caldera wall, the lone adult male peregrine falcon sailed on the thermals of the caldera cliffs waiting for an attractive female to appear. "I can sympathize with this fellow; I've been waiting for a female to show up for two years now myself," said Park Biologist Jim Milestone. Based on the remoteness of the site, he may be waiting a long time.

(Funding to assure continuation of the peregrine program at Crater Lake in 1989 has been eliminated in a series of drastic budget cuts.)

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