



Army Chopper Rescues Falcon Cunters

Five volunteer peregrine falcon counters, who had been manning sites on both sides of the Port Mansfield Channel (about 60 miles north of the Padre Island National Seashore), had to be airlifted out of their soggy sites in early June when the rains set in before their spring survey was completed.

The group, all of whom are experts in handling birds of prey, tried to continue their survey throughout the storms, but the attempt proved futile. They were sinking into the saturated sands and their equipment was too heavy to move under such conditions. The Corpus Christi Army Depot chopper had to make four trips to get the surveyers and their gear to high, dry land.

The survey effort is funded by the U.S. Army and collects information on the peregrine falcons migrating through this area. In spring, the birds are returning from either Latin America or Mexico, enroute to Alaska, Canada or Greenland. This year the group encountered 125 birds, which is about average.

The program is "permitted" through the USFWS, the NPS, and the University of Texas. It began in 1978. This year's team was headed by Tom Maetchle, who is working on a Doctorate at Boise State. "In the fall," he said, "we might find as many as 400 falcons migrating through here. The birds are younger, less experienced – 60 to 70 percent of them won't live through their first year." The average life span averages 10 years – if the birds make it through their first year.

The team covers an area 40 miles long by 12 miles wide. The birds are banded, blood sampled, measured, and released. Surveyors have found that birds who migrate from the farthest north, travel the farthest south. They also have found that the levels of pesticides have been decreasing in certain parts of the world.



Volunteer Scott Francis rests on his ATV in between trips to drier land. The air support saved the falcon team days of work in moving their equipment via ATVs through miles of sopping sand. (U.S. Army Photo by Francoise Cymes).