



Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

Perched with its nestmates in a large cliffside box, a young, almost fully feathered peregrine falcon peers hungrily through bars at passing birds. These captive bred nestlings are days away from fledging. With a little human help in the first few weeks (stealth deliveries of quail), they will learn to fly and hunt by instinct—no parents needed. From the 1970s to early 2000s, this was the scene at peregrine falcon “hack sites” around the nation as part of a multipronged effort to save the peregrine falcon from extinction.

Identification

Pointed wings, steep dives, and powerful, agile maneuvering characterize the large, crow-sized peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) in flight. Look for a whitish, slightly barred underside, a slate blue-gray back, and a distinct black “helmet” and moustache to distinguish the adult peregrine from other falcons in the Pacific Northwest. The similar sized prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) is gray brown above with dark armpits and a brown moustachial stripe on its white and brown head. The other two falcons in the region—American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) and merlin (*Falco columbarius*)—are distinctly smaller. As with most raptors, female peregrines are larger and significantly heavier than males, with a wingspan up to 114 cm (45 in). Male and female adults have similar plumage, but juveniles are buffier, with darkly streaked undersides and browner backs.

Distribution and Habitat

Comprising 19 subspecies worldwide, the

peregrine—which means wanderer—breeds in the tropics, on coastlines, in mountains, deserts, and the tundra. Nests, called eyries, are usually on cliffs near water, where the “duck hawk” finds its favored waterfowl and seabird prey. Peregrines are adaptable, however, and they nest where food is ample. This includes on skyscrapers and bridges in cities like Seattle and Portland, thanks to the release of captive bred birds near this new form of “cliff” towering over plentiful pigeon prey.

Diet and Behavior

Peregrines are aeronautic masters. They specialize in hunting birds, from tiny hummingbirds to pigeons, doves, and waterfowl as large as geese. Famous for their rocket-like vertical hunting dive (stoop), they can also outmaneuver agile swifts, catch bats and eat them on the wing, and occasionally capture (or pirate!) fish and other small mammals. Unlike hawks, falcons have a sharp triangular notch in their upper bills called a tomial tooth that scissors through the neck of their prey, severing the spinal cord.

Most but not all peregrines are migratory, moving south into Mexico and South America in search of prey for the winter.

Reproduction

Peregrines are monogamous and mate for life. Early spring courtship progresses from flying and perching together to exchanging food. At the nest ledge, bowing displays may be accompanied by a sharp, piercing “eechip.” By Mar–Apr in the Pacific Northwest, 3–5 elliptical, red-brown speckled eggs are laid in a shallow “scrape”—just a bowl-shaped depression in the dirt. The eggs hatch in just over a month. The female can actually lay another set if the eggs are lost or fail to hatch. (This “double clutching” proved key to boosting the number of young for captive breeding.) Fledging 5–6 weeks later, they soon give loud chase to any parent flying by with food, sometimes catching it from them in midair! In a few short weeks, the young are catching their own food. This short stretch to independence is another biological trait that helped their recovery through hack sites.



NPS / Gavin Emmons

Adult peregrine falcon.

Fun Facts

- Falconers have long favored peregrines. This fascination goes back at least to Egyptian times, with the falcon-headed god, Horus. Indeed, falconer knowledge of captive breeding techniques was vital to the bird’s recovery.
- One of three subspecies in North America, the Arctic peregrine migrates an astonishing 25,000 miles roundtrip to south America and back for the winter.

Conservation

Peregrine falcons have come a long way since their listing as an endangered species in 1970. Their massive population crash in the 1950s–1970s was caused by egg-shell thinning and other toxic effects of organochlorine pesticides, like DDT, that traveled up the food chain on land and in waterways. DDT was banned for most uses in 1972, and by 1998, nearly 7000 peregrines had been released in North America through captive breeding. Delisted from the Endangered Species Act in 1999, they now largely reoccupy their historical range. Several national parks, along with conservation organizations like the Predatory Bird Research Group, still monitor peregrine falcons to stay alert for possible new threats.

Where to See

Peregrines occur in or near all Klamath Network parks, breeding at Crater Lake NP, Lassen Volcanic NP, and Redwood NSP.

Learn More

The Peregrine Fund

Peregrine falcon sounds



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Nestlings in a hack box just days from fledging. Note the buffy and heavily streaked breast.

NPS / Gary Hartley