

PEREGRINE FALCON REINTRODUCTION
PROJECT 1990

NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER

Submitted by
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INTRODUCTION

The 1990 Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus) Reintroduction Project at New River Gorge National River has come to another successful end. This program, established at New River Gorge in 1987 (see Table 1), represents a cooperative effort between the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, the Peregrine Fund, the U. S. Forest Service, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service.

Craig Stihler, Wildlife Biologist for West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, was West Virginia's Coordinator for the peregrine project during 1990. Robert Sullivan, Park Ranger/Resource Management Assistant, coordinated the efforts of all agencies involved and served as the park Project Coordinator.

RESULTS

On May 9, 1990, initial preparations at the hacking site in the area of the Endless Wall began. The main task at this point consisted of hauling all the necessary equipment to the site. This equipment included tools needed to prepare the hacking box and all the gear required by two volunteers tasked with monitoring the birds.

The first set of six peregrine falcon chicks, 30 days old, were flown in from Boise, Idaho to Virginia and transported to the New River Gorge hack site on May 16, 1990. These birds did very well, however there was concern when a sub-adult male peregrine showed up a few days after release. This sub-adult did chase the young falcons, but fortunately presented no serious problems, and remained in the area during the remainder of the hacking period. Later this bird was identified by its band number as a bird released in the Gorge in 1989.

A seventh bird, held back for observation by The Peregrine Fund because of a potential plumage development problem, was added to the first set of six in the first week of June. There was some doubt that this bird could take care of itself adequately. Much time was spent by the park Project Coordinator observing this bird to ensure that it got the same chance at survival as the others. It disappeared in mid-July and was presumed to be the first death of the peregrine project. As suddenly and mysteriously as this bird disappeared it reappeared in early August, and erased any doubt that this bird wasn't able to fend for itself.

July 10th was the last day for the remaining hacker to be on site, and the closing down of the project would have begun shortly thereafter. Then Craig Stihler, WVDNR Elkins office,

telephoned the park Project Coordinator to advise him that because of many unforeseen difficulties at the North Fork Mountain (Reeds Cliff) hacking site six more peregrine chicks needed to be released from the New River Gorge site immediately.

Original plans were to hack two sets of six falcons at one site (Reeds Cliff) on the Monongahela National Forest. This project, funded mostly by Monongahela National Forest, got underway in early July. Six birds were placed in each of the two hack boxes at Monongahela NF (one week apart). Although returning falcons had been sighted on North Fork Mountain, and at the Reeds Cliff hack site itself, project coordinators had no idea a pair had taken up residence at the site. Usually, a returning bird poses little threat to the young birds (as in New River). In some cases, the returning bird can even prove helpful to the younger birds by providing a role model for both feeding and fledging. But a pair of adult peregrines poses a real problem. The decision was made to release the two oldest birds to test the pair's reaction. Thin fog rolled in for several days making this release impossible. With the birds anxious to test their wings, project coordinators agreed that the best option was to move the birds rather than risk complete disaster. The first set of birds, along with the hack site attendants and equipment, was moved to the New River Gorge site. The younger set of six birds was flown to a hack site in Maine.

On July 16th the move was made from Monongahela National Forest to New River Gorge. The move as well as the release of the second set of birds in the New River Gorge went well, however, early morning fog the day after the release created some problems. When the fog did lift, three of the birds were missing. Two of these birds eventually found their way back, one did not. Despite intensive searching by the hack site attendants and project coordinators, the third bird was never found. The remaining five birds did very well, with the sub-adult from 1989 and the two birds from the first set remaining in the area to continue providing examples of feeding and fledging for the younger birds.

September 5th was the last day for hackers to be on site, and closing down of the project began immediately. The closing date is determined when all the peregrines have not returned to the hacking area for 3 days. It is then assumed that the birds are feeding on their own. The park coordinator spent the next week taking quail to the hacking site and dropping it onto the hack box in the event that the birds might return after the site had been closed. During this period the park coordinator closely monitored the area to see if any peregrines had returned. No signs of the birds were observed.

Although returning birds from previous releases created a few tense moments, it is encouraging that birds are coming back to the area where they were raised. Plans for next year include a statewide "cliff watch" in early spring to locate any nesting pairs and monitor their progress. Depending on the results of the "cliff watch," there may be one more set of birds released in West Virginia in 1991.

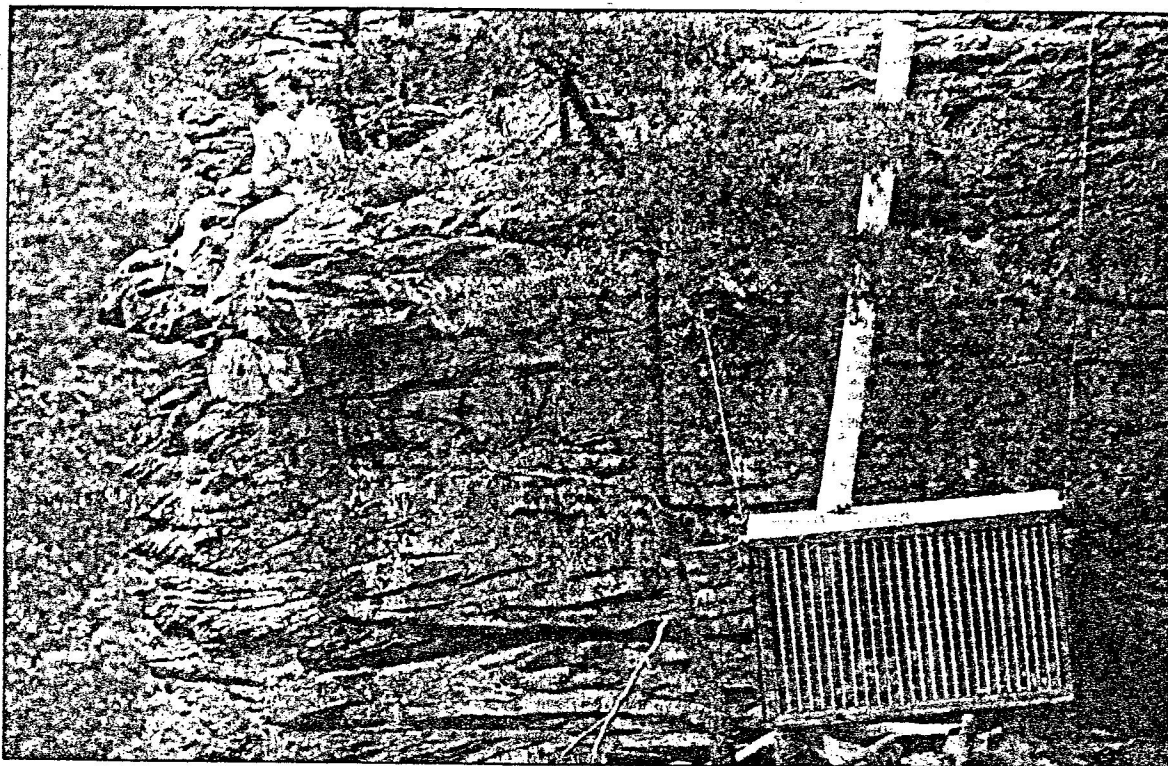
TABLE 1.

SUMMARY OF PEREGRINE FALCON
REINTRODUCTION PROJECT
AT NEW RIVER GORGE NATIONAL RIVER

Year	Birds Released
1987	3*
1988	6
1989	8
1990	13#
TOTAL	30

*One peregrine falcon chick sustained an injury and did not survive.

#One peregrine falcon chick disappeared during dense fog and was not sighted again.



Birdwatchers Craig Morrison (left) and Dave Zucker survey the New River Gorge from a perch near the cage that houses the young peregrines.

Photo by JIM NOELKER

Birdwatchers

Students will spend summer baby-sitting falcons

Grant Parsons
SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

LANSING — At a folding camp table about 30 yards from the lip of the scenic New River Gorge, Dave Zucker and Craig Morrison became surrogate parents to six baby peregrine falcons.

"You realize that you're independent contractors who will do this one job, and there are no benefits," said the Peregrine Fund's Marty Gilroy, sliding two-page legal contracts across the table to the West Virginia University students.

Then he smiled. "That is, the only benefits are the scenery and the joys of helping the birds."

"That's more than enough," Zucker said, signing on the dotted line. "Do we get copies of these?"

The new parents — "Mother Zucker and Father Morrison," as Morrison dubbed them — are responsible for nurturing, setting free and tracking the six screeching, endangered birds who now live in a bathtub-sized box about 20 feet below the top of the gorge.

The two are the front-line troops in the effort to bring the peregrine falcon back to West Virginia. Before the effects of the now-banned pesticide DDT killed off the birds, they were plentiful in the high ledges of the Appalachian mountains.

As field observers, Zucker and Morrison will pass the next two weeks by watching the birds with a high-powered spotting telescope, feeding them quail through a 6-inch pipe and raking out their box with a stick. If the weather is hot, they'll spray the birds down.

Then they'll set them free. For about six weeks after that they will chase the fledgling falcons up and down the gorge, keeping track of how far they roam and for how long.

All the while they will file weekly reports with the Peregrine Fund and try not to go stir crazy.

Their home is a blue, six-man tent attached to a suspended rain tarp, with a supply tent and a Coleman two-burner stove a few yards away. The nearest road is about a mile's hike away, with the

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Dave Zucker, birdwatcher

nearest "civilization" — a country store — a few more miles down the road.

It's not the most glamorous work, and the \$1,100 stipend will not make either one rich, but the project does have its rewards.

"For me, it's the fact that I'm working with an endangered species," said Zucker, a 22-year-old wildlife major at WVU. "I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for that."

The two-month stint allows him to use what he has learned in four years of college, and it helps prepare him for graduate school. Besides, he said, it sure beats going back to his native New Jersey and waiting tables.

Morrison, 19, Zucker's fraternity brother, college roommate and self-professed "West Virginia woodsman" from Jane Lew, agreed that the contribution to the world's future was important, but he had more pedestrian concerns.

"It'll be real fun to be out here on our own living in the woods for two months," he said. "And I hope to get an excellent tan."

Both say people reacted strangely when they said they were going to live in the woods for two months and watch birds.

"All my friends have said I was absolutely crazy," Zucker said. "But at the same time, they support it because they know I'm into it."

Zucker learned of the program through a friend who works at the state Division of Natural

Resources. "He just kept telling me the story and telling me the story, and each time he told it, it got better," he said.

This is the fourth year for the peregrine falcon program in West Virginia, said Craig Stihler, with the DNR's non-game wildlife program. With the Peregrine Fund, DNR officials helped place three falcons in 1987, six in 1988 and eight in 1989.

Funded by volunteer donations to the fund and to the state's non-game wildlife program, the falcon project aims to rebuild the species population. Peregrine falcons were totally wiped out in the Eastern United States because DDT weakened the shells of the bird eggs, Stihler said.

The program brings baby falcons to the area during the time they learn to fly, and they are "imprinted" in that area. After they are set free, they may roam as far as South Carolina, but they return to their adopted birthplace to mate after about three years.

Other release points are in Virginia and in the Monongahela National Forest.

Researchers spotted the first returning falcons last year — a good sign that the effort is working. If more return this year, the program may be discontinued in this area, leaving the new falcons to repopulate Appalachia.

"It's really good to start seeing things happening," he said. "You do all this work, and it takes three years to get any feedback."

While Zucker and Morrison admit that the hours stink and the pay is not that great, they think the job will be fun. In addition to watching the birds, they hope to get in some fishing and rock climbing, and they hope to simply enjoy the outdoors they both love.

In fact, their efforts may have an indirect effect on keeping the gorge pristine, Zucker said. While some have talked about building a road along the lip of the gorge to attract tourists, that may soon be impossible.

"If the falcons do get established here, there's no way they could develop this area because it would impact an endangered species," he said. "This area couldn't be touched."

