

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus





Opposite page:
A 28-day-old
peregrine chick;
**This page, from
left:** Peregrine
chicks; adult
female falcon.

BY MARGARET FOWLE & KATHY WOHLFORT

Considered the fastest animal in the world, the peregrine falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, is a medium-sized raptor with long pointed wings and a streamlined body. The name “peregrine” comes from the Latin referencing the birds’ wandering flights over the sea and to their secretive nesting sites. Peregrine falcons mostly nest on sheer cliffs with long-distance views, although they have been recorded nesting on bridge abutments and tall buildings. Their diet consists almost entirely of other birds.

Peregrine falcon populations suffered significant declines beginning in the 1940s largely due to DDT. By 1957, only 16 percent of the historic U.S. population remained. Of the 700 peregrines in the eastern U.S., the last wild eastern adult was observed in Vermont in 1970. That same year, the peregrine falcon was listed as a federally protected species. With help from the protections garnered through the Endangered Species Act, an intensive captive breeding and release (hacking) program started in 1975 and successfully re-established the peregrine to the eastern U.S. In 1984, the first peregrine pair returned to Vermont and nested successfully the following year.

The National Wildlife Federation’s Northeast Natural Resource Center is the coordinator of the peregrine falcon recovery efforts in Vermont. Biologists Margaret Fowle and Kathy Wohlfort work with volunteers and partners to monitor and

protect nesting cliffs during the breeding season as part of a partnership with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) and the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (VFWD). The Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH), New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC), Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection monitor their states’ peregrine populations.

To determine the status of territorial peregrine falcons, occupied cliffs throughout the states are monitored from early April through late July. With landowner permission, access to some cliffs is restricted during the breeding season to minimize human disturbance. Monitoring efforts attempt to locate nests, determine incubation, hatching and fledging dates, and count the total number of young fledged at each site. Three- to four-week-old nestlings are banded at several sites each year. Feather samples and any unhatched eggs are also collected for contaminants analyses. ATC’s own Matt Stevens, Environmental Monitoring Coordinator, has assisted with NWF’s banding efforts the past two years, as a technical rock climber.

Removed from the federal list of endangered and threatened species in 1999, and the Vermont State list of endangered species in the spring of 2005, peregrines are considered a recovered species in

Vermont and many parts of the region.

The peregrine falcon has entered a previously uncharted phase in wildlife restoration — sustaining the species’ recovery long after its removal from the Endangered Species List. While we celebrate the peregrine’s success, short and long term threats to the species’ viability remain, including occasional evidence of elevated levels of pesticides, contaminants and significant eggshell thinning in Vermont and other northeastern states. This and other issues such as encroachment of development, direct human disturbance and predation mean continued vigilance is essential.

There remains concern about USFWS and VFWD financial support for monitoring peregrines. To best prepare for future funding constraints, NWF’s peregrine program will continue to recruit and train volunteer monitors and enlist cooperating landowners to monitor and protect breeding sites long-term.

The success of peregrine recovery efforts has been due in large part to the protection of the state and federal endangered species acts, professional partnerships, and dedicated volunteers. To contribute to or be a part of the Vermont Peregrine Falcon Recovery Project, please contact Margaret Fowle at fowle@nwf.org or call 802-229-0650.

For information visit the NWF Web site at www.nwf.org.

PHOTOS BY STEVE FACCIIO, A PROFESSIONAL WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER WITH EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE PHOTOGRAPHING RARE AND ENDANGERED SPECIES.