

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

PEREGRINE FALCON

Falco peregrinus

ENDANGERED



Habitat: Open country, from coastal lowlands to mountainous high country.

Weight: Males, 1 pound, 4 ounces-1 pound, 9 ounces; females, 1 pound, 14 ounces-2 pounds, 11 ounces.

Length: 15-20 inches.

Wingspan: 43-46 inches.

Life Expectancy: May reach 17-20 years of age.

Food: Pigeons, waterfowl, crows, jays, starlings and other medium to small birds; occasionally beetles, dragonflies and migrating monarch butterflies.

Status: State endangered.

Identification: Adult peregrine falcons have long, pointed wings and a long, rounded tail with narrow, black bands, ending with a broad, dark band tipped with white. The barred upperparts are blue-gray, while the underparts are white to light buff and cross-banded with brown. The black crown and nape extend to the cheeks, forming a distinct black helmet. The feet are yellow. Immature peregrines are similar, but the back and underparts are brown and the throat is heavily streaked with brown. Both adult and immature peregrines have a bold, dark, vertical whisker-like mark (mustache mark) on the sides of the head.

Range: Once distributed worldwide, the peregrine now breeds primarily in the arctic region from Greenland to Alaska and the Northwest Territories. It is rare and local in the United States along the West Coast and in the Rocky Mountains. Reintroduction programs have restored small breeding populations along the East

Coast. Peregrines winter along the Atlantic coast from Long Island Sound through South America. Along the Pacific coast they winter from the Alaskan panhandle to South America.

Reproduction: Peregrine falcons reach sexual maturity at age 3 and return to the same area each year. The breeding sites, known as eyries, are located above an open area so that the falcons can launch their aerodynamic hunts. The nest is a hollow, unlined scrape on a cliff, ledge or rocky outcrop. Abandoned raven or hawk nests in similarly high locations are occasionally used. The most publicized nesting areas have been on roofs and ledges of city buildings. The same nest site may be used for many years. Male peregrines arrive at the nest site first and go through a series of aerial displays to attract the females to the site. Territories are usually reestablished by late March.

The 3 to 4 cream or buff-colored eggs, covered with red-brown markings, are laid in late April and May at intervals of 2 to 3 days. Incubation, primarily done by the female, begins with the second or third egg and lasts 28 to 29 days for each egg. The hatchlings are closely brooded by the female for the first 14 days. The male typically brings food for all to the nest and the female feeds the young. The young begin flying at 35 to 42 days but remain dependent on the adults for another 2 months.

Reason for Decline: Peregrine falcon populations declined rapidly between 1950 and 1965 throughout the United States and parts of Europe. By 1975, the entire population of peregrines in the eastern United States was considered to be extirpated. This decline is directly attributed to the effect of pesticides, particularly DDT, on breeding populations. The speed and global scale of this species' decline makes it one of the most remarkable events in recent environmental history.

History in Connecticut: The peregrine was a regular nester in Connecticut from the 1860s through the early 1900s. Prior to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and the strengthening of collection regulations, hundreds of peregrine eggs and many adult specimens were collected in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Some live birds and eggs were collected for use in falconry. Many more eggs and specimens were added to private collections as part of a popular late nineteenth century hobby.

Peregrine nesting activity in Connecticut declined through the 1920s and 1930s. Nesting peregrine falcons completely disappeared from Connecticut in the late 1940s and remained absent until 1997. In 1997, peregrine falcons successfully nested on the Travelers Tower in Hartford (this was also the site of the last known nesting in the 1940s). Since that time there also has been a report of a successful nesting in Bridgeport.

Interesting Facts: The peregrine falcon is probably best known for its spectacular method of capturing prey in mid-air. It flies faster than most other birds and, when hunting, it increases its speed by making aerial dives with the wings partially or fully pulled in. The peregrine

plunges at speeds up to 175 m.p.h. to attack its prey, which is killed instantly. Normal flight speed can range between 28 to 60 m.p.h.

Because of its habit of preying on waterfowl, the peregrine falcon has historically been referred to as the duck hawk.

While the peregrine was once considered extirpated from the eastern United States, successful reintroduction programs, using captive-bred birds, have helped restore small breeding populations along the East Coast. Since 1972, the Peregrine Fund, a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring peregrine populations, has conducted a large captive breeding program. Many of the birds raised in this program have been successfully introduced into the wild at potential nesting sites. At the beginning of the reintroduction program, a large number of the young peregrines placed at potential nest sites were killed by great horned owls and raccoons because there were no adult peregrines to protect them. Now, many of the birds are reintroduced in urban locations where the threat of predation is virtually nonexistent and food supplies are abundant.

In 1999, based on the recovery of peregrine populations, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service formally removed the peregrine falcon from the federal list of endangered and threatened wildlife. Even though the peregrine falcon was delisted from the federal endangered species list, the species still satisfies the criteria for state listing and remains a Connecticut endangered species.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: North American peregrine falcon populations continue to be threatened by the use of DDT in the tropics where they winter. Support for the advancement of alternative methods of pest control in developing nations will help not only the peregrine, but ospreys and countless species of songbirds that nest in the United States and Canada and winter in Central and South America.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

