



WILDLIFE NOTES

Peregrine falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Peregrine falcons, capable of diving after other birds in a rushing blur, declined in numbers due to pesticide use. In the last 15 years these winged hunters have been re-introduced in several areas of the United States, including forests and even high-rise buildings. In New Mexico, however, a small native population of peregrines survived, so a reintroduction program was not necessary. That remnant native population has provided the nucleus for gradual population increases in recent years.

The peregrine falcon is different from other hawks as it has long, pointed wings and a long tail, a notch in its upper bill, and a peg-like structure in the nostril. It is a medium-sized bird and measures about 1 1/2 feet long with a wing span of three feet. Peregrines have heavy marks on their cheeks that resemble a moustache.

Descriptive Details

Adult peregrines are bluish-gray above and

white below, with a bold black wedge below the eye. The tail is dark gray with several lighter gray bars and a white tip. The wing quills are black with white spots, and the underwings are dark gray to black, spotted or barred with white. The eye-ring and feet are yellow, the bill blue-black, and the iris dark brown. Immature peregrines are dark brown above and heavily streaked below.

Distribution

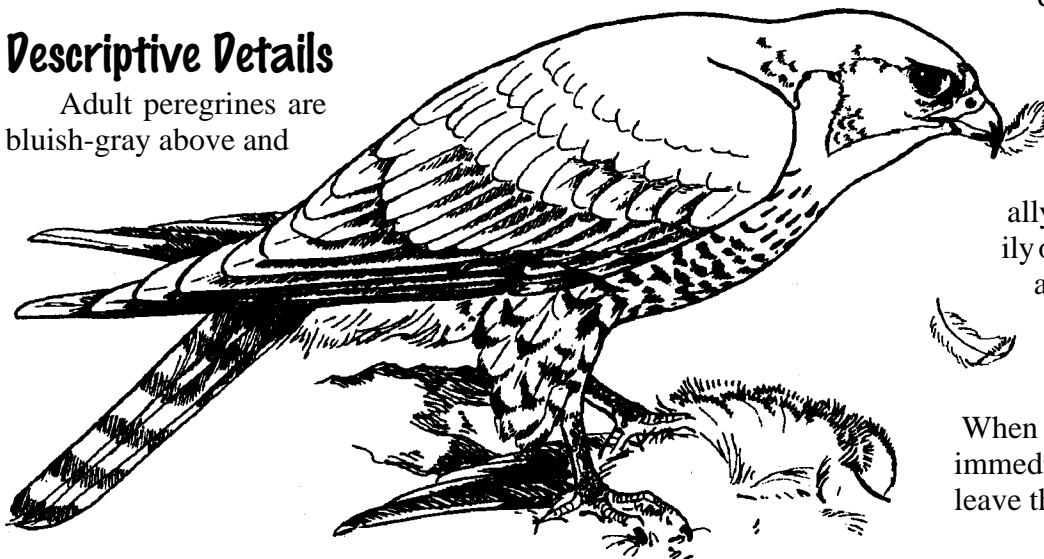
The species breeds throughout much of North America, as well as in South America, Eurasia, Australia, Africa, and Oceania. In New Mexico the peregrine breeds locally in mountainous areas and can be found statewide in migration and in the winter – but mainly west of the

eastern plains. Key habitat areas are nest sites, including both those that are currently occupied and ones that are unoccupied but still suitable for nesting.

Biology

In New Mexico the breeding sites of peregrine falcons are on cliffs in wooded and forested habitats, with large "gulfs" of air nearby in which these predators can forage. Peregrines take all of their prey on the wing, typically after a stoop or dive from above. Swallows, ducks, large shorebirds, jays, woodpeckers, swifts, mourning doves, and pigeons are among the commonly-taken prey.

Normal flight speeds of these falcons are 45-55 mph, but in dives they may reach 270 mph. They nest on ledges or in potholes on cliffs, with three to four eggs being laid directly on the bare floor. The eggs are creamy white with chestnut speckles and splotches and are 2 by 2 1/2 inches in size. Incubating birds are generally silent, and they can be easily overlooked. When the young are older, the adults may aggressively react to intruders, including calling sharply "kak-kak-kak". When this occurs, humans should immediately vacate the area and leave the birds in peace.



Status

The peregrine falcon decline in North America and Europe began in the 1940s, when DDT began being used as an insecticide. This chemical was eaten by the prey of peregrines, and thus also consumed by the falcons. Once inside the falcons' bodies, it caused eggshell thinning and reproductive failure, resulting in declines and losses in populations.

Peregrines in New Mexico also appear to have been affected by DDT and related chemicals, perhaps largely because of contamination of prey in Latin America. Peregrine decline in New Mexico bottomed out by the late 1970s, and now the small breeding population shows some indications of recovery. Con-

trol over habitat disturbance and prohibition against the taking of these birds has also helped stop the decline. However, with the present small breeding population, the loss of even one falcon could be a setback to the recovery of this bird.

Conservation

Maintaining or restoring suitable habitat for the peregrine, especially for breeding birds, is the primary goal. Besides protecting the habitat, reducing pesticide contamination in both the United States and Latin America remains important. The sanctity of breeding territories needs to be guaranteed so falcons may continue to use them in a productive manner.

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