

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## PEREGRINE FALCONS FOR THE NATION'S CAPITAL

Four captive-bred, month-old peregrine falcons have been placed in a man-made nest atop the Department of the Interior Building in the Nation's Capital in the first attempt to restock this endangered bird of prey into a major U.S. metropolitan area, Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus announced today.

"The prospects of seeing this magnificent bird once again soaring above the Nation's Capital testifies to the fact that all the news about endangered species is not gloom and doom," Andrus said, prior to placement of the peregrines on the roof. Andrus has been a long-time supporter of the Birds of Prey Natural Area in Idaho, which contains wild peregrines.

"This is a happy occasion. The peregrine release symbolizes the less publicized, but critically important work of endangered species recovery teams. These are teams of the Nation's finest biologists from the Federal, State, and private levels--who map out plans to ensure the survival of species facing extinction."

Two biologists will live in the eight-story building, two blocks from the White House, for the next 6 weeks to study, feed, and assist the young falcons as they grow up and learn to fly.

The human help is necessary because there are no wild peregrines to do the job. Pesticides and other toxic chemicals have wiped out all wild breeding peregrines east of the Rocky Mountains.

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The Endangered Species Act authorizes and funds recovery teams, 66 of which have already been established. The law directs the Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct a program of conservation and restoration of endangered species. To help establish this goal, an Eastern Peregrine Recovery Team was established whose recommendations of releasing captive produced peregrines led to the peregrine release in Washington, D.C.

The birds were supplied by Dr. Tom Cade of the Peregrine Fund at Cornell University, which has led the way in the successful breeding and raising of peregrines for release back to the wild. Since 1973, when 20 peregrines were produced at Cornell, a total of 324 young have been raised with another 60 expected to be produced this year. Scientists from the Peregrine Fund will live in the Interior Building and "bird sit" with the young. They will also be observing the falcons via a remote controlled television that will be made available to the public in a display in the Interior lobby.

In the West where less than 100 wild breeding pairs of peregrines remain, captive-bred peregrine fledglings are placed in nests of wild "foster parent ," peregrines whose own egg production has been hurt by DDT.

In the East, where there are no more wild breeding peregrines, a falconry technique called "hacking" is used to reintroduce the species. Four to six young peregrines, called eyases, are placed in protective enclosures at suitable eyries, either natural cliffs or man-made structures a week or two before they're able to fly. Food is supplied by biologists who keep watch over the birds. As soon as the young falcons are developed enough for sustained flight, they are released from the enclosure and allowed to fly free. Having learned to associate the hacking station with food, they will return to it for their needs until they are able to sustain themselves by their own hunting efforts, normally 3 to 4 weeks after first flying. The young birds will, it is hoped, develop a lasting fixation to the site and return to the same place or area to breed when they've reached sexual maturity at the age of 2 or 3.

Although the Interior Building will be the release site for this hacking experiment, most likely when these birds would be capable of reproduction, they'll choose a taller structure in the Washington area in which to rear their young.

Before the widespread use of DDT, the species had been known to nest on castles in Europe, skyscrapers in New York City, and on the Sun Life Insurance Building in Montreal, Canada. There are also many records of peregrines wintering in cities where they find an ample supply of prey in large populations of urban pigeons.

Biologically, Washington, D.C., which has numerous records of peregrines nesting nearby, offers advantages for falcon hacking reintroduction because the area has an ample supply of pigeons and starlings as well as the absence of predators like owls.

The peregrine falcon is the top of the line in the avian world--its speed, grace, skill, and exquisite beauty are unsurpassed. The streamlined bird, which has been clocked in dives at 200 miles an hour, is a specialist in direct pursuit in the open--favoring non-forested areas in which to hunt, particularly shores, marshes, river valleys, and tundra. Even though its level speed of flight exceeds that of most birds, the peregrine takes advantage of height from which to launch its attack.

A diving peregrine is a hurling wedge of streamlined feathers, its feet lying back against the tail and wings half closed. At such speeds, it delivers a fierce blow to the prey with half-clenched talons, the usual method of disabling or killing its prey. As is usually in predator-prey relationships, it tends to single out the unwanted, or the older and weaker individuals, usually birds, virtually always striking them in flight.

The peregrine is a medium-sized hawk about the size of a crow, with a short tail and long pointed wings. The adult bird is slate blue above and its wings, tail, and flanks are barred with black. It has a white throat with black streaks on each side of its face. Females are about one-third larger than males. The bird's strong hooked bill and powerful taloned feet make it highly specialized and efficient at hunting.

The peregrine is the most widely distributed bird species in the world, breeding on every continent except Antarctica. Three of the 18 subspecies are found in North America: the American peregrine of the 48 States and southern Canada, the Arctic peregrine, and the Peale's peregrine, the only one not listed as endangered, ranging from British Columbia to the Aleutian Islands.

Although never a common bird, the peregrine maintained stable breeding populations throughout its world-wide range until the late 1940's when DDT was found to have caused a rather sudden, wide-scale decline in Europe and North America. DDT, used to control insects, ascended the food chain that led to the peregrine which received concentrated doses of the toxic chemical. Although not sufficient to kill the majority of the birds outright, the chemicals caused eggshell thinning. Some shells were so thin and calcium deficient that they were crushed during normal incubation.

Since DDT was banned by Federal law in the early 1970's the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other concerned groups began to save and reestablish a breeding stock of the peregrine.

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