



NEWS

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Cindy Hoffman 202-208-3008

Mitch Snow 202/208-5634

THE PEREGRINE FALCON IS BACK!
BABBITT ANNOUNCES PROPOSAL TO REMOVE WORLD'S FASTEST BIRD
FROM ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST

The world's fastest bird has pulled out of a dive toward extinction and once again is soaring. The peregrine falcon is expected to be removed from the endangered species list, according to a proposal announced today by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, marking one of the most dramatic success stories of the Endangered Species Act.

"Every American should be proud," Babbitt said. "In 25 years, the people of the United States have rescued this awesome raptor from the brink of extinction. We have proved that a strong Endangered Species Act can make a difference. We don't have to stand idly by and watch our wildlife go extinct. We can bring species back. We have proved it with the peregrine falcon."

The peregrine once ranged throughout much of North America from the subarctic boreal forests of Alaska and Canada south to Mexico. A medium-sized raptor, the falcon nests on tall cliffs or urban skyscrapers and hunts other birds for food, reaching speeds of 200 miles an hour as it dives after its prey. While those nesting in the lower latitudes travel shorter distances, if at all, peregrines nesting in Alaska and Canada are well known for their long spring and fall migratory flights to and from wintering areas in Latin and South America.

The bird's remarkable speed and agility, however, could do nothing to prevent its sharp decline after World War II when widespread use of the pesticide DDT and other organochlorine pesticides decimated populations. The pesticide DDT caused peregrines to lay thin-shelled eggs that break during incubation.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers, learning of studies being conducted in Great Britain on the link between DDT and egg shell thinning, confirmed these findings on peregrines in the United States. Rachel Carson, a former Service employee, helped alert the public to the hazards of pesticides on wildlife in 1962 when she published her book *Silent Spring*. Ten years later, the Environmental Protection Agency took the historic and at the time, very controversial, step of banning the use of DDT in the United States, which was the first step on the road to recovery for the peregrine.

In 1970, the Service listed the American peregrine falcon as endangered under the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, the predecessor of the current law, when the population in the eastern United States was wiped out and the populations in the West had declined by as much as 80 to 90 percent below historical levels. By 1975, the population reached an all-time low of 324 nesting pairs in North America.

The banning of DDT made the recovery of the peregrine falcon possible. But the protections provided by the Endangered Species Act and the extraordinary efforts of the Service, in partnership with state wildlife agencies, universities, private ornithological groups, and individuals, accelerated the pace of recovery through captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts, and the protection of nest sites during the breeding season. Similar efforts took place in Canada, where the Canadian Wildlife Service and Provincial agencies took the lead in a major captive breeding and reintroduction program. Currently, there are at least 1,593 peregrine breeding pairs in the United States and Canada, well above the overall recovery goal of 631 pairs.

"It would have been hard to imagine this day back in the 1970s when there were so few peregrines left, but it shows how effective a law the Endangered Species Act is when allowed to work as it was intended," Babbitt said.

Although a final determination to delist the peregrine would remove it from the Act's protection, it would still be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The MBTA prohibits the taking, killing, possession, transportation, and importation of migratory birds, their eggs, parts, and nests except when specifically authorized by the Interior Department, such as in the case of regulated hunting seasons for game birds.

In addition, the Service will work with state wildlife agencies to monitor the status of the species for a minimum of five years, as required by the Endangered Species Act. If it becomes evident during this period that the bird again needs the Act's protection, the Service would relist the species.

Secretary Babbitt announced the proposal to delist the peregrine falcon at Stone Mountain Park near Atlanta, Georgia. Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark made a simultaneous announcement of the proposal at The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. Founded in 1970 at Cornell University, the Fund helped lead the way toward recovery with a highly successful captive breeding program.

Overall, government and private raptor experts have reintroduced more than 6,000 falcons into the wild since 1974. Some of the reintroductions took place in urban areas after researchers

discovered that the falcons have successfully adapted to nesting on skyscrapers where they can hunt pigeons and starlings.

State wildlife agencies also played a fundamental role in the recovery process by protecting nesting habitat, carrying out releases, and monitoring populations within their borders.

"The recovery of the peregrine has been a model of partnership in the conservation and recovery of an endangered species," Clark said. "Our agency could never have reached this day by ourselves. We needed the help of many organizations and individuals to bring about the recovery."

The Service's proposal to delist the peregrine falcon will be published in the *Federal Register* on August 26, 1998. The public may comment on the proposal in writing until November 23, 1998. Comments should be sent to: Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, 2493 Portola Road, Suite B, Ventura, California 93003.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

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****Editors' note:** B-roll and still photographs of peregrine falcons are available. Interviews with Service employees and other pioneers in the falconry community are also available. Press materials are available on the Service's website at www.fws.gov.