DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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ENDANGERED PEREGRINE FALCON RELEASE ON ATLANTIC COAST SCHEDULED

The endangered peregrine falcon, killed off in the wild by DDT east of the Rocky Mountains by the '60's, will be returned to several Atlantic Coast sites this spring, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

A number of falcons bred in captivity at Cornell University by their ornithologist, Dr. Tom Cade, will be released in a cooperative venture involving the Army Material Command-U.S. Army, the National Audubon Society, the Peregrine Fund of Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The reintroductions, which are experimental in nature, will first take place in New England, New York State, and in the Chesapeake Bay area. Subsequent releases each spring thereafter are planned for the East Coast now that Cornell University has developed an eminently successful captive breeding program.

Additionally, a western breeding facility for peregrine falcons has been established under the direction of Cornell's raptor staff at a research site in Colorado in cooperation with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Young peregrines raised there are scheduled to be returned to western wild natural areas in the near future.

The upcoming releases on the East Coast will be trial ventures that will concentrate on an adaptation of the falconer's technique of "hacking." A week before nestlings reach the flying stage, groups of four to six will

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be placed in protective enclosures at suitable eyries--either natural cliff sites or on man-made structures. As soon as the birds are capable of sustained flight, they will be 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 meals until they are able to sustatin themselves by their own hunting efforts, normally three to four weeks after first flying.

Only after a large number of banded and color-marked falcons have been hacked in this way will it be known how successful they will be in surviving to breeding age and whether they will return and breed in the areas where they were originally hacked. The working hypothesis is that these young birds will develop a lasting fixation to the site, or at least to the immediate area where they are hacked, and that survivors will return to the same places to breed at the age of two or three years.

Depending on how many of Cornell University's maturing three-year-old falcons come into breeding condition in the spring of 1975, Dr. Cade might be able to supply young falcons for as many as 10 stations. First priority areas for release are the Cayuga Lake Basin and the Shawangunk Mountains in New York, and two or three sites in the Chesapeake Bay area on the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. If additional young become available, then releases will be tried at some natural cliff eyries in New England and on man-made structures on national wildlife refuges along the Atlantic Coast.

In planning for future large-scale releases, researchers hope to adopt a pattern of stocking that will enhance the possibility of reestablishing self-perpetuating breeding populations in nature. Peregrines were never uniformly dispersed as breeding pairs across the land but existed in more or less distinct, isolated groups. Researchers plan to concentrate on stocking small, local clusters of 10 to 12 eyries located close enough to each other so that the falcons inhabiting them can function as a self-maintaining, interbreeding group.

Wildlife scientists have identified such localities. Local regions that look good for establishing nucleus populations include: Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, where a large number of old, intercommunicating eyries are known; the Catskills and Shawangunk Mountains of New York; the Adirondack Mountains; the Susquehanna River system in New York and Pennsylvania; Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Coast from New Jersey into the Carolinas, where there are no natural eyries but where there is a good food supply; and the upper Mississippi and Wisconsin River systems.

The peregrine falcon is a medium-sized hawk with long, pointed wings and long tail. It is known for rapid, shallow wing beats. The adult is slate blue-gray above and its wing, tail, and flanks are barred with black. It has a white throat with black moustache marks on each side of its face.

The peregrine falcon breeds from the non-Arctic portions of Alaska and Canada south along the western mountains to Baja California and Mexico. Its eastern limits presently follow the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains in the United States. Its distribution is local in the southern boreal forests of Canada and a few pairs still breed in Labrador. It winters chiefly in its breeding range, but the more northern birds move to the south. Tundra regions north of the tree line are breeding areas for similar, but migratory, Arctic peregrine falcon which winters south of the United States.

The peregrine falcon's former breeding distribution also included the Eastern United States south to Georgia and areas of Ontario, southern Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces of Canada.

Currently the peregrine falcon is wiped out east of the Rocky Mountains in the United States, in Ontario, southern Quebec, and the Maritimes. Local declines have also been reported from the Western United States, the Yukon Territory, and interior Alaska. The bird's status in the eastern Canadian boreal forest is unclear but evidently it is not numerous there.

The number of known eyries with adults present is currently estimated at no more than 50 in the United States south of Canada. A few hundred pairs of the Arctic subspecies peregrine still breed in northern Alaska and the moist subarctic forests of Canada and Greenland principally along major rivers.

The primary reason for the peregrine's decline is DDT. Falcon eggshell thickness has been reduced 15 to 20 percent since 1947. All field and laboratory evidence points conclusively to the cumulative effects of chlorinated pesticides and their breakdown products obtained by the falcons from their prey. The major culprit has been DDT and its derivative DDE, which have increased adult mortality, affected the peregrine's reproductive mechanisms and caused eggs to become thin-shelled or otherwise nonviable. Habitat destruction and other human disturbances have also been factors in the bird's decline. DDT levels in the East have been declining, thus offering hope that the transplants will work permanently.

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