DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FALCONS RESTOCKED IN THEIR FORMER RANGE

Close to 30 peregrine falcons--an endangered species--are being released into the wild in Colorado and five Eastern States this summer by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Cornell University, and the States involved.

The birds are being released in New York, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland. Also, four birds are being released in Colorado along the eastern slope of the Rockies where they have dwindled in recent years. The exact locations are not being announced because a trial effort in 1974 resulted in the shooting of several birds by people who don't like falcons. This year, the public is invited to witness one release at the Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge near Atlantic City, New Jersey, on July 6. Four birds will be placed into the wild and the public may approach within a half mile of the release site.

The peregrine falcon was killed off by DDT and auto exhaust east of the Mississippi River by the early 1960's. The auto exhaust and DDT picture has improved to the point where scientists now believe the birds can live a healthy life.

Last year, 16 peregrine falcons were released in the wild along the East Coast and 12 of them survived. Two of the falcons were killed in fights with their natural enemy, the great horned owl. A third, placed at the site where the other two were killed by the owls, was recaptured and brought back to the breeding lab at Cornell University, so the owls wouldn't kill it, too. The fourth bird lost was killed by electrocution when it hit a power line.

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The 12 success stories, though, are very heartening to scientists involved in this project. The birds have not only adapted admirably to the wild and found adequate food supplies, but, more importantly, they have not migrated to Latin America or elsewhere during their first year.

This was one of the unknowns when the experiment was begun last year. Many falcon species do migrate when weather conditions force them off Arctic and far-north breeding grounds. They head as far south as Latin America each year. However, they pick up considerable pollution from DDT and other pesticides in use in many of the countries to the south.

The 16 birds that were released last year were bred and reared in captivity at Cornell University's Ornithology Laboratory under the direction of Dr. Thomas Cade, assisted by Stan Temple and Jim Weaver. The scientific theory they wanted to test concerned the migratory instinct in these birds. They had done considerable research on swallows and geese before they attempted the falcon program. They believed that birds would not migrate north of their birthplace, because they would identify the length of daylight hours and the movement and position of the sun as being characteristic of their home territory.

The theory seems to have been borne out after a year of detailed radio tracking of the 16 birds. They have shown a tendency to migrate, but it is from west to east. Released inland over New York and other Eastern States, the falcons move east with the autumn weather and the appearance of waterfowl--a food supply--in great numbers along the coast. They did not head south with the onset of winter, but, instead, survived well along the coast.

Dr. Cade began this current year's release program in early June. When completed there will be four birds in Pennsylvania, three in New York, six in New Hampshire, seven in Maryland, four in New Jersey, and four in Colorado. These, of course, are in addition to the 12 survivors of last year's experiment.

Now that the operational procedures of training these birds back into the wild have been tested and shown to work, the project is scheduled to pick up steam next year. Dr. Cade's breeding facility at Cornell is expected to hatch out close to 100 peregrine falcons next year. They, too, will be placed back in the wild.

The species being restocked in the old haunts of the rock peregrine is not the same bird that once lived there. The rock peregrine was never scientifically identified as a different subspecies, but it is considered to have been a different race of peregrine falcon than the American peregrine. Regrettably, there are none like it left in the world. The American peregrine falcons being released under this program are of a different build, plumage, and migratory behavior than the original inhabitants of that ecological niche.

As last year's experiment showed, this subspecies is the most likely replacement for the rock peregrine. They will interbreed and do very well in the Eastern United States, if left alone by man.

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