DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

David Klinger 202/343-5634

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ENDANGERED PEREGRINE FALCON CLEARS FINAL HURDLE-
CAPTIVE-BRED ADULTS HATCH YOUNG ON NEW JERSEY REFUGES

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SECOND WASHINGTON, D.C., RELEASE UNDERWAY

The future is looking brighter for the endangered peregrine falcon.

In an historic first for this severely depleted bird-of-prey, captive-bred adult peregrines have returned to release sites on two of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuges in New Jersey to successfully lay fertile eggs and hatch four chicks.

The reproductive success in New Jersey represents the first time in over 20 years that peregrine falcons have been known to fledge their own young from eyries (nest sites) in the eastern United States. The fact that captive-reared and released peregrines are able to reproduce and raise young on their own has given added encouragement to biologists who hope to reestablish self-sustaining populations of the species in the East. DDT and other pesticides wiped the birds out east of the Mississippi River and severely depleted the western population in the 1950's and 1960's.

"We're very encouraged by this latest accomplishment and are heartened by what this success represents for the future of the peregrine," says Lynn Greenwalt, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "In addition, we're pleased that the procedures and techniques that have been used to help restore this endangered species are meeting the test and showing some real, positive benefits."

The successful adult falcons were raised and released as young birds over the past several years by Cornell University's Peregrine Fund in a cooperative program with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Eastern Peregrine Recovery Team, State fish and game departments, conservation organizations, and private individuals. The effort is part of a larger conservation and restoration program for the peregrine funded under the Endangered Species Act.

"This is the final test, the proof of the pudding," says Dr. Thomas J. Cade, director of the Peregrine Fund, about the newly-hatched young. "This is what we've been waiting to see, proving that our techniques work. The final hurdle was what has just been accomplished, namely, that these captive-bred peregrines can reproduce on their own."

One pair of artificially-reintroduced adults successfully produced two male and one female hatchlings at Manahawkin, New Jersey, on property owned by the A.T. & T. Long Lines Division and managed under lease by Barnegat National Wildlife Refuge. A second pair hatched a lone female at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, farther down the New Jersey shore near Atlantic City.

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The Brigantine hatchling emerged about May 3. It is the product of a female released at Manahawkin 2 years ago and a male from Barnegat Bay (a third New Jersey reintroduction site) also released in 1978. Another female was placed in the hack box (man-made nest) in an effort to improve this season's rearing success and insure a larger area population of peregrines for potential breeding in future years.

Biologists first observed feeding at the Barnegat/Manahawkin site on May 7 and theorize that the young were hatched about that date. The female parent was released at Barnegat Bay in 1978; the male adult is believed to be a peregrine from a 1975 Barnegat Bay release project. An additional female was also placed into the hack box by biologists at this location.

All of the young have now successfully flown and are expected to begin taking prey on their own within about 3 weeks.

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In an innovative effort to bring the peregrine back to its former range in some of the Atlantic Seaboard's populous cities, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Peregrine Fund sponsored a release project in Washington, D.C., in 1979. Last summer, four young peregrines were released from the roof of the Department of the Interior building in downtown Washington in an effort to restore the species to the area, where peregrines were known to nest through the mid-1930's and winter as late as the 1950's.

A second release project in Washington is being conducted this summer by the Peregrine Fund at the Smithsonian Institution. Six hatchlings -- four males and two females approximately 6-weeks-old -- were placed in a release box on the south tower of the Smithsonian's headquarters "Castle" on June 19. There they will reside under the care of two attendants, testing their wings and preparing for their first flights over Washington's downtown Mall. Biologists anticipated removing the caged front of the box in late June, depending upon the speed of the birds' development. The peregrines will then gradually be taken off of the food their attendants are providing as they begin capturing prey on their own.

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From 1975 through 1979, 204 captive-reared peregrines have been released at 20 locations in nine eastern States under the cooperative program between Federal and State governments and the private fund. This year, there are 15 active release sites on the East Coast.

Four refuges in the Fish and Wildlife Service's 412-unit chain of National Wildlife Refuges are currently hosting reintroduction projects -- Brigantine and Barnegat in New Jersey and Chincoteague and Fisherman Island in Virginia. Biologists first began releasing peregrines at Brigantine in 1976 and at Barnegat in 1977. The third New Jersey site in nearby Barnegat Bay has hosted a project since 1975, and a fourth release site has been established in Cape May County, New Jersey, this year.

At these sites, biologists construct 30-foot towers at isolated release locations. Young captive-bred peregrines are raised on the towers in a reintroduction process known as "hacking" until they are old enough to fly and hunt for themselves. In subsequent years, as has been the case on the New Jersey refuges, the young birds often return to these towers, popularly characterized as "ecological magnets" that draw the peregrines back for potential breeding. Upon reaching sexual maturity at 2 to 3 years of age, the falcons can begin to reproduce.

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