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More Peregrine Falcons Finding a Home in Southeast Michigan

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The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have compiled nearly 40 years of monitoring data on Peregrine Falcons in southeast Michigan. These data show that the southeast Michigan Peregrine Falcon population has expanded from when five young were re-introduced in 1987 to 15 nesting pairs that fledged 30 young in 2016.

This is a remarkable recovery for a species that once was listed as a federally-endangered species. The complete report, including a history of Peregrine Falcons in Michigan, status and trends of nesting birds from 1987-2016, and management and research needs into the future, is available at:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/peregrine_falcon_reproduction_se_mi_573302_7.pdf.

Peregrines are crow-sized birds, with a wingspan of 36-44 inches. Adults have slate-gray backs and barred breasts, while immature birds have brown backs and heavily streaked breasts. All peregrines have prominent cheek ("moustache") marks on either side of their head. As is true in most species of "birds of prey", the female is larger than the male: females average 32 ounces in weight, while males only average 22 ounces in weight.

These falcons require large areas of open air for hunting, and are not found in areas that are heavily forested. The diet of the peregrine falcon includes a wide variety of small birds, including pigeons, seabirds, shorebirds and songbirds. Occasionally, they have been known to take small ducks, earning them the misleading name of "duck hawks." Peregrines hunt by diving at their prey from far above and catching them in mid-flight. During these incredible dives, called "stoops", the birds can reach speeds of 180 miles per hour.

Monitoring Peregrine Falcons is important as their population recovers from a major population decline in the 1960s. Peregrines are considered endangered in the state of Michigan, though they are no longer federally-endangered. During the 1960s the Peregrine Falcon population declined precipitously. The shells of Peregrine Falcon eggs became extremely fragile because adult birds had accumulated DDT, a pesticide that interfered with calcium metabolism. By 1968, the entire U.S. Peregrine Falcon population east of the Mississippi was gone.

Michigan began its peregrine recovery efforts in 1986. In 1993, the peregrines in Michigan began reproducing successfully. In 2016, there were 54 nest sites in the entire state of Michigan and 29 of them produced young. 13 of the 29 sites that produced young were in southeast Michigan. There are currently 29 sites being monitored for peregrine nesting in the southeastern part of the state.

“The Peregrine Falcon recovery in southeast Michigan is a true conservation success story,” notes Christine Becher, Southeast Michigan Peregrine Falcon Nesting Coordinator for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. “One thing we must all remember is that we share the same ecosystem with Peregrine Falcons and if southeast Michigan is cleaner for Peregrine Falcons, it is cleaner for all of us.”

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources is committed to the conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state's natural and cultural resources for current and future generations. For more information, go to www.michigan.gov/dnr.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

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Peregrine Falcons nest on tall buildings, often in cities. Photo by Barb Baldinger.