

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

Range: Rivalled only by the Osprey, the Peregrine Falcon has one of the most global distributions of any bird of prey. This falcon is found on every continent except Antarctica. Peregrine Falcons are highly migratory in the northern part of their ranges. Northern Peregrine Falcons breed in Alaska and Canada and migrate to Argentina and Chile during the winters.



Peregrine Falcon
Falco peregrinus



Habitat: The Peregrine Falcon lives in a wide variety of habitats including tropics, deserts, coastal areas and tundra. They prefer open areas with cliffs or cliff-like structures and an available source of water. They avoid the rain forests and cold arid areas. They can be found from sea level to 12,000 feet in elevation. It is estimated that there are 1,650 nesting pairs in the U.S. and Canada.

Description: Worldwide, there are 19 subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon. In North America, there are 3. The subspecies most common to the continental United States (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) is generally the size of a crow. It has slate and blue-gray wings with black bars on both the back and the pale buff-colored undersides. The face is white with the black “malar stripe” (mustache) under the eyes characteristic of all falcons. It is 15 to 21 inches in length with a 40 inch wingspan and an average weight of 2 pounds. The female will be larger and heavier than the male. Another typical falcon trait, it has a tooth-like projection (tomial tooth) on its short beak that it uses to break the neck of the prey it captures with its talons.

Hunting/Prey: The Peregrine Falcon searches for its prey from a perched position or in the air. It captures its prey in the air since its primary food consists of birds such as starlings, mourning doves, pigeons, pheasants, and waterfowl. It may capture its food from a dive or after a rapid pursuit. In pursuit, it often flies in under the prey and rolls over to grab the prey from below. In a dive or stoop, it hits the prey with half-closed feet and retrieves the dead bird in mid-air or after it falls to the ground. Rarely does the falcon kills its captured prey by forcing its talons into the body as accipiters do. Instead falcons bite into the prey’s neck severing the nerve



cord; even with prey killed in a stoop. (Cornell Lab Birds of North America) After biting into the prey's neck to kill it, it will carry small prey to a habitual plucking perch. They will also eat small mammals, amphibians and reptiles.

The Peregrine Falcon is active at all times of the day, including dawn and dusk and are sometimes nocturnal. Radio-tagged migrants have been documented flying at night. (Raptors of Western North America)

The following websites show a Peregrine Falcon in a stoop:

http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/player/animals/birds-animals/birds-of-prey/falcon_peregrine_velocity.html

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnT2joxnkqY&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5lJQ7pQzKo&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3mTPEuFcWk&NR=1>

Breeding/Nesting: Peregrine Falcons form monogamous pair bonds that may last for life. Both males and females have a strong attachment to previous nesting sites, which may explain monogamy over multiple breeding seasons rather than attachment between individuals. (University of Michigan Museum of Zoology) The female will lay between 2 and 6 eggs beginning in mid-May in high cliffs, trees or tall buildings. Falcons do not build nests, but rather dig small depressions called "scrapes" in the sand or dirt or debris. Sometimes they will use an abandoned hawk's or raven's nest. The eggs will hatch in 33 to 35 days. The young fledge in 35 to 42 days. Both the male and female will incubate the eggs, with the female incubating the majority of the time.

Lifespan: Though most Peregrine Falcons do not live to be 1 year old (survival rate for the first year is 40%), the average age of those that live beyond the first year is 13. In the wild, the Peregrine Falcon lives from 7 to 15 years. (Defenders of Wildlife) Maximum longevity records for banded birds range from 16 to 20 years. (Cornell Lab – Birds of North America) The longest known captive Peregrine Falcon lived to be 25. (University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Cornell Lab)

Threats: The extensive use of the pesticide DDT in the 1950's and 1960's almost wiped out the Peregrine Falcon. By 1968, all breeding pairs vanished in the Eastern United States. The pesticide accumulated in the falcon's prey and either killed the falcons directly or reduced the number of off springs due to thinning of the eggshells. The weight of the incubating falcon broke the thinned eggshells killing the embryo. In 1969, it was listed as endangered. With the banning of DDT in 1972 and the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, the Peregrine Falcon populations began to make a recovery. The Peregrine Fund's release of more than 4,000 captive-reared birds in 28 states over the past 25 years has aided the Peregrine Falcon's recovery. It was removed from the Endangered Species list in the 1999. Although the Peregrine Falcon has few natural enemies, the Great Horned Owls, gyrfalcons and golden eagles may kill adults. Cats and foxes will also predate on the young. Urban populations suffer from collisions with cars buildings, and fences and electrocution, and shooting.

Other Peregrine Falcon Facts:

- The Peregrine Falcon is also called the Duck Hawk and Wandering Falcon.



- The Latin name *peregrinus* means “wanderer” referring to the falcon’s long migrations The Peregrine Falcon has one of the longest migrations of any North American bird. Tundra-nesting falcons winter in South America and may travel over 15,000 miles in a year. (Cornell Lab of Ornithology)
- In normal flight, the Peregrine Falcon averages 25 to 34 mph. In direct pursuit of prey, it may reach speeds of 70 mph. In a stoop, it may reach 200 mph or more (Cornell Lab of Ornithology) making them the fastest animal on earth.
- The Peregrine Falcon is a favorite hunting bird among falconers because of its speed and high dives.
- The traditional term for the male is “tiercel.” This term, Latin for “third” may have come about because the male is one-third smaller than the female or because of the belief that one in three eggs hatched is a male. The female is referred to as a “falcon.”
- Peregrine Falcons have adapted to urban living where tall buildings with ledges offer nesting sites, sources of water and large populations of pigeons and starlings.
- During the breeding season, the Peregrine Falcon will defend its territory aggressively. Attacks have been noted on eagles, other falcons and Great Horned Owls. In central Arizona, an adult Peregrine Falcon struck the head of a male Bald Eagle in flight; the eagle died 8 days later from an apparent concussion. (Cornell Lab Birds of North America)
- In the Middle Ages, only the king or nobles could use a Peregrine Falcon to hunt; ordinary people were allowed to hunt only with a kestrel.
- The Peregrine Falcon’s eggs are more elliptical than other birds' eggs. This unusual shape allows the egg to roll in a circle, reducing the likelihood that one might inadvertently fall over the nest site.



Nesting Peregrine Falcons at a California cliff nesting site



a peregrine falcon egg





Jester

Jester was found as an orphaned baby and taken to rehabbers near Oak Creek Canyon (Schnebly Hill). When he arrived at Liberty a month later, July 24, 2007, he was imprinted with jesses in place and unable to be released.





Ace

Ace arrived at Liberty Wildlife on April 11, 2010 as a second-year adult. He had severe damage to his left wing, presumably an impact injury. Despite extended efforts to repair the wing, it became apparent that the fracture was not going to heal and the wing tip was amputated. With his flight impaired, he was classified a non-releasable and became another member of the Education Team.

Sources: Raptors of Western North America by Brian Wheeler, The Peregrine Fund, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, University of Minnesota Raptor Center, Carolina Raptor Center, Audubon Watch List, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology

