

Trail Natives: Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

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Considered the fastest animal in the world, the peregrine falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, is a medium-sized raptor with long pointed wings and a streamlined body. Peregrines' power and magnificence inspire a sense of awe and freedom. The name "peregrine" comes from the Latin referencing the birds' wandering flights over the sea and to their secretive nesting sites. Peregrine falcons mostly nest on sheer cliffs with long-distance views, although they have been recorded nesting on bridge abutments and tall buildings. Their diet consists almost entirely of other birds.

Peregrine falcon populations suffered significant declines beginning in the 1940s largely due to DDT. By 1957, only 16 percent of the historic U.S. population remained. Of the 700 peregrines in the eastern U.S., the last wild eastern adult was observed in Vermont in 1970. That same year, the peregrine falcon was listed as a federally protected species. With help from the protections garnered through the Endangered Species Act, an intensive captive breeding and release (hacking) program started in 1975 and successfully re-established the peregrine to the eastern U.S. From 1975 to 1983, 500 chicks were released in the eastern U.S. In Vermont, 93 young birds were released at three hack sites from 1982 to '87. In 1984, the first peregrine pair returned to Vermont and nested successfully the following year.

The National Wildlife Federation's Northeast Natural Resource Center (NWF) is the coordinator of the peregrine falcon recovery efforts in Vermont. Biologists Margaret Fowle and Kathy Wohlfort work with volunteers and partners to monitor and protect nesting cliffs during the breeding season as part of a partnership with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) and the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (VFWD). The Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH), New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC), Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection monitor their states peregrine populations.

To determine the status of territorial peregrine falcons, occupied cliffs throughout the states are monitored with binoculars and spotting scopes from early April through late July. With landowner permission, access to some cliffs is restricted during the breeding season to minimize human disturbance. Monitoring efforts attempt to locate nests, determine incubation, hatching and fledging dates, and count the total number of young fledged at each site. Three- to four-week-old nestlings are banded at several sites each year. Feather samples and any unhatched eggs are also collected during banding for contaminants analyses. ATC's own Matt Stevens, Environmental Monitoring Coordinator, has assisted with NWF's banding efforts the past two years, as a technical rock climber.

The peregrine falcon has returned to the eastern U.S. and its recovery in Vermont has reached its final stages. Removed from the federal list of endangered and threatened species in 1999, and the Vermont State list of endangered species in the spring of 2005, peregrines are considered a recovered species in Vermont and many parts of the region.

The peregrine falcon is a nationally recognized iconic species that has entered a previously uncharted phase in wildlife restoration – sustaining the species' recovery long after its removal from the Endangered Species List. While we celebrate the peregrine's success, short and long term threats to the species' viability remain. There has been occasional evidence of elevated levels of pesticides, contaminants and significant eggshell thinning in Vermont and other northeastern states. All eggs collected in the Northeastern Region from 1996 to 2005 are being tested for organochlorines, flame retardants, and mercury. This is the first such study for these northeast eggs and the results may indicate if peregrines are accumulating these chemicals. The steady peregrine population growth in Vermont signifies that current contaminant loads do not appear to be preventing the expansion of the state's population, but monitoring the population could detect any future negative effects. This and other issues such as encroachment of development, direct human disturbance and predation indicate that continued vigilance through monitoring and management are essential to ensure the viability of peregrine populations in the East.

Since the peregrine's federal and state de-listings, there remains concern about USFWS and VFWD financial support for monitoring peregrines during the federal and state post-delisting periods. Both plans require monitoring at least a subset of sites for peregrine occupancy and productivity. Funding sources have not been identified, and current state funding through the State Wildlife Grants program must be matched equally with non-federal funds. To best prepare for future funding constraints, NWF's peregrine program will continue to recruit and train volunteer monitors and enlist cooperating landowners to monitor and protect breeding sites long-term.

The success of peregrine recovery efforts has been due in large part to the protection of the state and federal endangered species acts, professional partnerships, and dedicated volunteers. To contribute to or be a part of the Vermont Peregrine Falcon Recovery Project, please contact Margaret Fowle at fowle@nwf.org or call 802-229-0650.

For more information on this and other programs, visit The National Wildlife Federation on the web at www.nwf.org.