



Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

The peregrine falcon is one of North Carolina's rarest birds of prey. Whether perched on a mountain cliff or flying along a barrier island beach, peregrine falcons invoke respect and admiration. Peregrine falcons may be seen almost anywhere in the state, but sightings would most likely occur in the mountains during the spring breeding season or along the coast during the fall migration.

History and Status

Because of its territoriality, nest-site requirements and dependence on other birds as prey, peregrine falcons need large areas in which to live and reproduce. Therefore, they do not occur in large numbers anywhere in their range. The Arctic regions of North America support only about one pair per every 2,000 square miles.

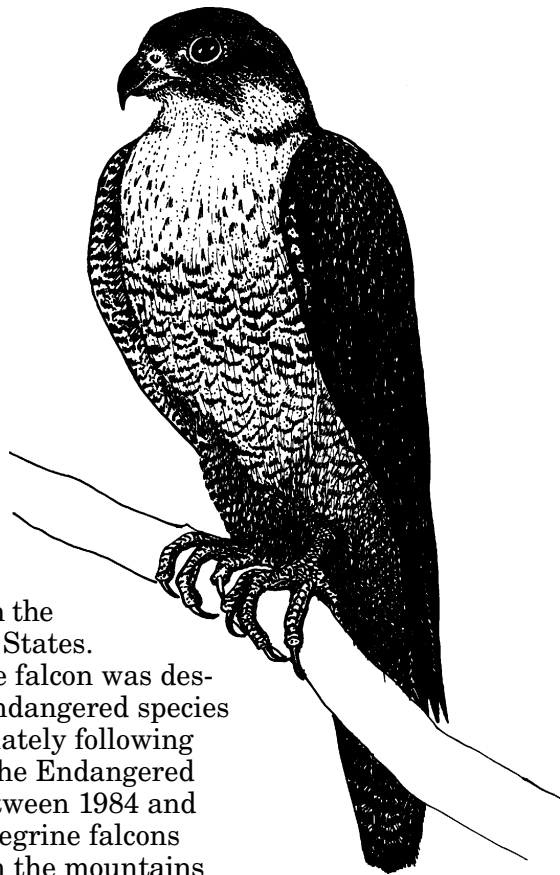
Historically, peregrine falcons bred in North Carolina until 1957, but they disappeared from the state and from much of their range because of the use of organochlorine pesticides such as DDT. These pesticides are ingested by the falcons in the prey they eat. Through a process called biomagnification, the chemicals accumulate in the tissues of the falcon, reducing the thickness of its egg shells and resulting in the eggs collapsing under the weight of the incubating parent. Peregrine falcon population numbers fell so low that they were extirpated from much of their range, requiring the reintroduction of captive

breeding birds in the Eastern United States.

The peregrine falcon was designated as an endangered species in 1973, immediately following the passage of the Endangered Species Act. Between 1984 and 1991, young peregrine falcons were released in the mountains of North Carolina at carefully chosen sites with the hope that they would return to breed in the area. Today, six pairs of peregrine falcons breed in the state.

Description

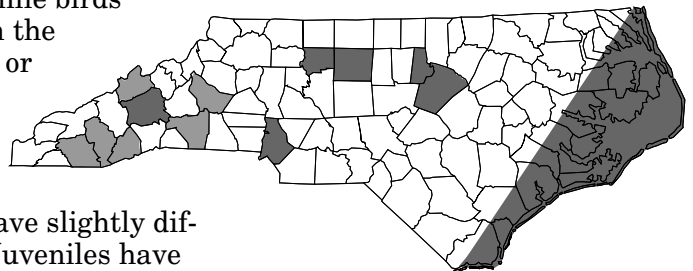
The peregrine falcon is a crow-sized raptor with very distinctive plumage. The head is covered with black feathers that extend down along the side of the head, creating a hooded appearance. The wings and back are a slate-gray color. The throat, chest and belly are white with horizontal bars of black or dark brown. The central part of the breast lacks the barring. Juvenile birds visibly differ from the adults. Their feet or talons are a dull blue, as opposed to a bright yellow in adult birds, and they have slightly different plumage. Juveniles have brown wings and back, with much heavier barring on the chest and underparts. Female



peregrine falcons are slightly larger than males.

Habitat and Habits

Peregrine falcons nest in tall mountain cliffs with an unobstructed view of the surrounding area. These cliffs must have ledges or small caves that provide a nest site that is inaccessible to predators and sheltered from wind, rain and excessive temperatures. Normally these cliffs are situated along ridges, bluffs or in gorges with a body of water nearby. Peregrine falcons also will nest on ledges on tall



Range Map:

Winter

Year-round (breeding)



buildings in cities. Peregrine falcons do not actually build a nest. They make a depression or "scrape" in loose gravel, soil, pieces of bark or leaf matter.

Peregrine falcons also require an adequate prey base consisting mostly of small to medium-sized birds. The peregrine falcon is a highly specialized raptor, adapted to catch prey by diving at high speeds, and then striking and disabling it in midair. The falcon regularly captures birds that fly over water, mud or sand flats, marsh and other open or exposed places. Consequently, grackles, robins, flickers, doves, pigeons, shorebirds, terns and small gulls are most often taken by peregrine falcons in North Carolina.

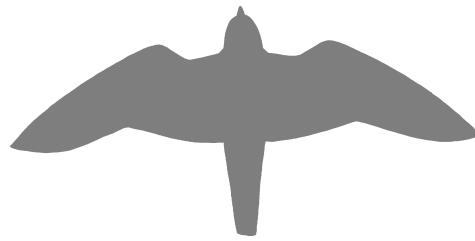
Range and Distribution

The peregrine falcon has almost a worldwide distribution, occurring on all continents except Antarctica. The 19 subspecies of peregrine falcons are very tolerant of a wide range of weather conditions.

The peregrine falcons that breed in North Carolina mountains are hybrids of several subspecies. Peregrine falcons that breed in the southern parts of their range may spend the winter near their breeding grounds, but most migrate south along coastlines to winter in Central and South America. Some peregrine falcons winter in large cities or along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. The *tundrius* subspecies breeds in tundra areas of northern North America and Greenland and is the subspecies commonly seen along the North Carolina coast during migration.

People Interactions

An encounter with a wild peregrine falcon is a treasured experience. Peregrines are breeding once again in North Carolina because of successful reintroduction efforts, yet in the past, human activities have been very detrimental to the



flight silhouette

bird. In Europe, they were commonly shot because it was thought that they killed large numbers of gamebirds. Research since has proven this to be untrue. Falconry is an ancient sport in which falcons or other raptors are trained to kill and retrieve gamebirds. In the past, falconers were allowed to capture wild peregrine falcons to train but at present this practice is illegal in North America, allowing wild peregrine falcons to remain free. Captive breeding of peregrine falcons for falconry has reduced poaching of wild peregrine falcons.

References

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Credits

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WILD Facts

PEREGRINE FALCON

Classification

Class: Aves
Order: Falconiformes

Average Size

Wingspan: 36 in. to 44 in.
Weight: 2.2 lbs.

Food

Small to medium-sized birds

Breeding

Tall cliffs and buildings. The female lays three or four eggs, usually in mid-March to early April in North Carolina. The eggs are brown or dark tan flecked with small blotches of dark brown. Both parents help incubate the eggs for 28 to 32 days.

Young

The female normally feeds the young while the male does most of the hunting. The chicks are fed four to eight times a day and are protected from predators by both parents. Young peregrine falcons fly when they are between 35 and 42 days old.

Life Expectancy

90 to 100 percent die within first year. Adult survivorship is about 60 percent. Some peregrine falcons live to 20 years.