

FALCON FACT SHEET

ABOUT THE PEREGRINE SPECIES

- * Peregrine Falcon is the common name for the Latin, "Falco peregrinus."
- * Peregrines are an endangered species of the order Falconiformes, which includes 38 species of falcons. The Peregrine species is one of five falcons found in the United States. The other falcon species found in this country are the Gyrfalcon, the Prairie Falcon, the Merlin and the Kestrel. None of these other species face the same threat of extinction as the Peregrine.
- * Within the Peregrine species, there are a number of subspecies. Arctic birds are marked by very white breast feathers and very black back feathers. South American or Spanish birds are marked by tawny breast feathers and a brownish back.

PEREGRINES: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

- * A female peregrine lays a "clutch" of three to five eggs each spring, then shares the duties of incubating them for four weeks with her mate. The eyases, as baby falcons are known at birth, will hatch after spending about a full day "pipping" at the shells with a sharp point on their beaks (called an egg tooth).
- * At birth, eyases weight approximately four ounces, sport a scant coating of fluffy white down, and are about the size of baby chickens. The eyases retain the egg tooth for about three to five days after hatching. Their down is replaced by feathers in three to five weeks.
- * Like infants in many other species, eyases are virtually helpless at birth. They can walk by about 3 weeks of age, but must have food brought to them. They grow tremendously fast, doubling in size within ten days. By 12 weeks of age, they begin flying, at which time they are considered adolescent birds.
- * Adolescent birds begin to hunt for food and care for themselves at 12 to 15 weeks.
- * A peregrine is full grown at three years of age. Females, the larger of the sexes, grow to an average of 900 grams in weight and measures an average of 18 inches from beak to tail. Males will weigh about 600 grams and measure about 12 to 13 inches.

HABITS, NOTABLE FEATURES

- * Mating habits: Peregrines generally mate for life, once the proper mates meet. First, the birds will "pair," that is, form a "friendly" relationship, marked by courtship flights and the male bringing food to the female. Mating occurs in February and March, and eggs are laid within two weeks of mating. Each egg must be fertilized individually, so it is not unusual to have a clutch with several fertile and several infertile eggs.

- * Eggs then are incubated by both male and female parents for four weeks. Chances of survival for new offsprings (eyases) are 50 percent during the first years.
- * Flight: Peregrines have been timed at 200 miles per hour in flight.
- * Prey: Peregrines are birds of prey, feeding on other birds such as pigeons, ducks, flickers, jays, woodcock and doves.
- * Territory: Peregrines defend large territories in cities and rural areas - up to ten square miles. They will drive out other Peregrines, any birds of prey (especially Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks in downtown Baltimore), and other perceived threats like window-washers. Once eyases have learned to fly and hunt on their own, they leave (sometimes with parental encouragement) their birth site and wander in search of their own nesting sites.

Most northern Peregrines are migratory - the USF&G Peregrines do not make annual migrations, instead staying in Baltimore through the winter. Their food supply is stable in the winter, and the temperatures are relatively mild also.

AN ENDANGERED SPECIES GETS HELP

- * Peregrines are of particular interest to ornithologists and bird lovers because the species has faced near extinction for the past several decades. Once plentiful in the United States, there were approximately 1,000 nesting pairs nationwide during the 1930s, some 300 to 400 of which lived east of the Mississippi, while the rest primarily domiciled in the Rocky Mountains.

During the late 1940s, the birds began disappearing from their natural habitats in mountainous regions and cities. The cause was traced to their ingestion of the pesticide DDT, which was sprayed on crops and in marshes to prevent harm by insects. DDT was ingested when the Peregrines fed on other birds that had consumed insects sprayed with DDT. Scientists found that the chemical weakened the birds reproductive capabilities, specifically by inhibiting calcium production and making eggshells too thin to last through incubation.

- * By 1965, peregrines had disappeared as a breeding species east of the Mississippi, where some 400 Peregrines nested as recently as 1940. Only a handful of Peregrines remained in the Rocky Mountains. Although DDT has been outlawed since studies confirmed its detrimental effects on the environment (1972), the chemical remains a threat. An estimated 500 Peregrines, or about half those previously found here, now live in the eastern United States. In 1994, about 100 pairs were breeding along the East Coast.

- * The return of Peregrines to the environment comes thanks to work by ornithologists at Cornell University, who created the Peregrine Fund project in 1970. The Peregrine Fund project includes research into the biology and ecology of birds of prey. As part of the project, ornithologists breed and raise peregrines in laboratory settings to maturity, then release them in hopes that they will survive in today's urban environments as well in the "wild" settings the birds are more accustomed to. Ornithologists hoped that birds will naturally pair, mate and produce offspring, thus re-establishing the species.

* In the second half of the eighties, captive breeding efforts by The Peregrine Fund decreased as peregrines reproduced well in the wild with minimal human intervention.

USF&G'S PEREGRINE FALCONS: SCARLETT, BLYTHE AND THEIR SUITORS

SUMMARY

Since 1978, the USF&G Insurance Home Office building in downtown Baltimore, Maryland, has been an unusual urban home for a continuous series of Peregrine Falcons. The phenomenon, eagerly attended by ornithologists, the press and city residents, began when a young female Peregrine, fondly known as Scarlett, was released over the Chesapeake Bay by Peregrine Fund ornithologists, and selected the skyscraper near Baltimore's harbor as her cliff-like home.

Scarlett attracted national attention in the years that the Peregrine Fund ornithologists attempted to provide mates for her. She became a focal point of the Fund's attempts to reintroduce Peregrines to today's environment. Although planned mating attempts failed for the first five years they were attempted, Scarlett successfully raised 17 "adopted" eyases supplied by the Peregrine Fund over the years from 1978 to 1983.

Scarlett made history in the spring of 1984 when she finally mated successfully with a wild male bird. Her four natural-born eyases were the first to be bred in an urban setting on the East Coast in more than three decades.

Scarlett died of an unfortunate accident in the fall of 1984. But her mate, Beauregard, remained at the nest on the 33rd floor ledge of the USF&G building. He soon took a new mate, Blythe. This pair lives on the USF&G building, and produced young from 1985-1991, raising 23 young.

When Blythe died early in 1992, an unbanded young falcon (named Felicity by a fourth grade class from Fullerton Elementary) mated with Beauregard, producing three young in 1992, four young in 1993, and two young in 1994.

