

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH BOSTON'S PEREGRINES

by Chere Bemelmans

On July 1, 1987, I saw a Peregrine Falcon from the thirty-first floor of the building at One Beacon Street in downtown Boston. We were separated by only a pane of glass.

The Peregrine, the female of the two juvenile birds introduced into the nest on June 24, was sitting on a ledge. She was looking around, very interested in the fifteen persons looking out at her. She was food begging. Every few minutes she called -- six to eight short wild cries at a time, then a pause. Sometimes she would cry out over the city; other times she would cry while looking in at us. Someone put a hand on the window. She moved toward it, cocked her head, and extended her wings about half their span, responding to the hand.

I was overwhelmed by the incredible beauty and wildness of the Peregrine close up. I had been watching the birds for months from One Beacon: their nest, first with eggs, then with the introduced Prairie Falcon, was visible to the naked eye from my office building. I had seen the birds daily in my scope, and yet, the sight of this Peregrine inches away was something that I was not prepared for. She was less than two months old and had flown for less than a week, yet the strength and power in her body was apparent. Her beak, which at times she pressed against the window, dominated her head. Yet just as striking were her eyes -- huge and black, they moved constantly. Her claws were amazingly large; like her beak, they were strong and powerful. Her chest was heavily speckled with brown. Five or six down feathers stuck to her head. If it were not that the wind only ruffled these feathers, I would have thought that they were not attached. When spread, her wings looked too big for her body.

Since early March, when several of us observed the Peregrine courtship flight, we had watched the birds with telescopes and binoculars. The first clutch of eggs was laid between April 13 and 19; the eggs broke on the nineteenth -- Easter Sunday. The second clutch was laid between May 4 and 11. These eggs were removed by Tom French of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife as they were laid and were replaced with infertile chicken eggs. On May 11, all four were flown to Boise, Idaho, where they all successfully hatched. These offspring have been released in Maine.

To see if Boston's Peregrine Falcons would be "good parents" (Peregrines occasionally attack their own young), a Prairie Falcon chick, more plentiful than the endangered Peregrines, was placed in the nest on June 8. This chick was readily accepted by the foster parents, and, for the next several weeks, we watched the behavior of the Peregrines as they tended to this youngster. This



Boston Peregrine

Photo by Peter A. Southwick

young Prairie Falcon is a historic bird in her own right -- one of the first falcons to be born as a result of artificial insemination with frozen sperm!

When the young Prairie Falcon arrived, her white body was clearly visible against the gray of the ledge the nest was on. At first she stayed close to her foster mother, who attempted to keep the young falcon under her body. (We called the bird in attendance at the nest or doing housekeeping, such as cleaning or patrolling, the female. The bird bringing prey, we called the male.) The Prairie Falcon grew unbelievably fast; she seemed to double her size in a week. She began to toddle around the area of the nest, and soon the female parent had to abandon her attempts to keep the youngster under wing. Her efforts as the chick grew were entertaining to watch.

On June 16, around 9:00 A.M., the adult female was observed perched on the ledge just above the nest. The juvenile was difficult to see, perhaps sleeping. The male arrived with prey and landed on the left edge of the ledge. The juvenile immediately woke up and became very active, and the female parent ran over to the male and snatched the prey from him. The male then took off and soared in the vicinity of the nest. The female ate first, then fed both the chick and herself.

Sometimes the adult female would fly in slow, tight circles, high but directly above the nest. I called this activity "patrolling." One day while on patrol she chased a gull from the space over the nest. Diving at it repeatedly, she was clearly in pursuit. Under attack, the intruder picked up speed rapidly, and once it was clearly on its way, the Peregrine stopped the chase and returned to the area above the nest. Apparently a good housekeeper, the female would take objects from the nest in her claws and, flying over the city, drop them. She made several trips per cleaning session. The male had a spectacular habit. He would dive straight down from the top of our building, which directly faces the McCormick Building and the nest, level off at about the tenth floor, and cruise past his nest. We observed this activity on several occasions.

The week before two "authentic" Peregrine chicks were to be placed in the nest and the young Prairie Falcon were moved because the birds were suffering heat stress. We had observed both the adult and the chick apparently panting. Although it was not moved far, we could no longer directly observe the nest site because of a wall.

Two Peregrine chicks, a male and a female, were placed in the nest in mid-June. The Prairie Falcon, an experiment along with two other Prairie Falcons, was either brought back into the breeding program or given to a falconer. The chicks fledged on June 26 and June 29, and on the twenty-ninth, spectacular family flights began as the young joined their parents in the air.

The Peregrine-watchers at One Beacon were fortunate on July 1 that the young female bird landed on the ledge of one of the members of the Peregrine-

watching network. Word of her arrival spread quickly, and soon crowds of delighted people were watching this wild and powerful raptor. After perching for an hour, the young bird became restless. Her food-begging cries had produced neither parent nor food. She moved around on the ledge a bit and then, still facing the window, spread her wings. The span was astonishing -- she seemed to unfold wing when there should be no more. Flapping them awkwardly, slowly, and still holding them extended, she turned to face the city. She toddled about a foot to the edge of the ledge, paused an instant, hunkered down, and then hurtled herself off into space, wings beating furiously. Already fast, she was gone in an instant.

Later, we watched the adult and young Peregrines soaring together. From the thirtieth floor, we saw them rise at least twice as high from the ground as we were -- four falcons, two circling smoothly, two flying erratically until they became barely visible specks in the sky.

After forty years without them, Massachusetts again has breeding Peregrines, and for those of us in downtown Boston who watched these birds so closely, their return is an experience we shall never forget!

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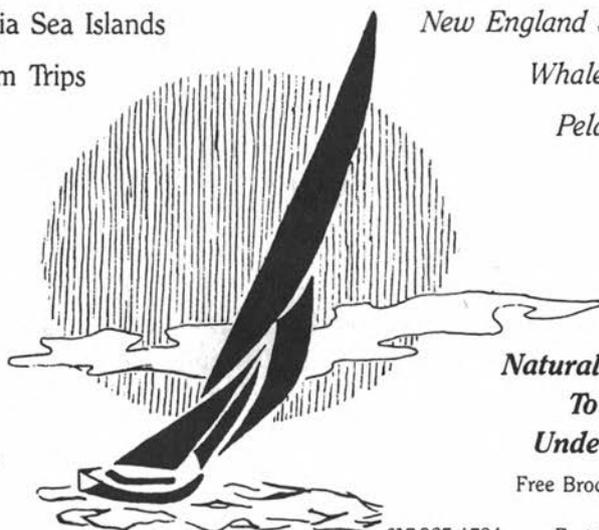
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