

ABOUT THE COVER: PEREGRINE FALCON

This past June I was driving to Logan Airport in Boston. Just before leaving the Central Artery to enter the Callahan Tunnel, I glanced up at the Custom House clock tower and saw the silhouette of a perched Peregrine Falcon against the sky, motionless like some fantastic gargoyle on a French cathedral. It reminded me of forty years ago when, as a boy, I watched Peregrines on Harvard University's Memorial Hall near Harvard Yard. They disappeared soon after and were gradually followed into oblivion by most of the population of the eastern race of the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), victims of chlorinated hydrocarbon chemical exposures. They had nested in about one dozen aeries in Massachusetts through the 1930s. Fortunately, the arctic breeding Peregrines have substantially recovered in recent years. The gargoyle bird on the Custom House is the product of the captive breeding and reintroduction program pioneered by Tom Cade at Cornell University.

The Peregrine is a spectacular bird and was the favored falcon of noblemen and kings for many centuries. There are nearly twenty subspecies, and the species has a worldwide distribution that is more extensive than any other avian species. Peregrines are considered by many to be the fastest flyers of any birds, occasionally achieving speeds of up to 200 mph in stoop dives. They are the consummate flyers and hunters, preying mostly on shorebirds, waterfowl, and a variety of other birds. They attack their prey in direct chases, usually ending with the Peregrine overtaking and grasping the victim in its talons, or in spectacular stoop dives in which the prey is usually captured by either grasping or by a direct strike on the head or back with open talons. They have been known to kill birds considerably larger than themselves with these stoops. Undoubtedly, gravity is used to accelerate the falcon and thus markedly increase the force with which it strikes. Northern Harriers, Snowy Owls, and Red-tailed Hawks are among the reported victims.

Spectacular flight also plays a role in Peregrine courtship. Courtship may take several weeks and typically involves a variety of courtship flights. The birds may tumble together from great heights or swoop down on each other. The tercel (male) may display by diving or plunging on tucked wings; by doing loops, rolls, and zigzags; or by soaring in tight circles. A variety of vocalizations may accompany the display flights, including one that sounds something like the swinging of a rusty gate. The tercel often delivers food to the female, typically dropping the prey to her while flying above her.

Most Peregrine Falcons nest in aeries on cliff shelves. The nest is a mere scrape in the debris on the shelf, and the usual clutch size is three or four red and brown spotted cream-colored eggs. Both sexes incubate, but the tercel is the first to hunt, and he brings his kill to the female. Peregrine eggs hatch in about a

month, and the young birds are flying in about five to six weeks.

Peregrine identification usually should not be a problem. They are mid- to large-sized falcons, with the male much smaller than the female. The immature birds are brown above, while adults are blue-gray. Both adults and immature birds appear heavily streaked below, but adults have a striking white chest and throat. All Peregrines have a distinctive black mustache stripe. At a great distance both sexes usually appear uniformly dark. They have the typical pointed falcon wings but appear chunky. Their flight is distinctive, with shallow and rapid strokes, similar to those of cormorants and Common Loons. They often alternate a burst of wingbeats with short glides. They look entirely different, however, when soaring because their wings are blunt and their tails are widely spread. Soaring Peregrines can be easily confused with Broad-winged Hawks.

Now that the effects of pesticides on Peregrine reproductive success have diminished, Peregrines are more common during fall migration, sweeping across the marshes and dunes of Cape Cod and the offshore islands, to and from their arctic breeding grounds. Once again birders have an opportunity to view this majestic species in wild settings or on the man-made cliffs of our major cities.

W. E. D.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

For the second consecutive issue and fifth overall, Paul Donahue has contributed artwork for *Bird Observer's* cover. Paul is given to peregrinations himself, typically spending several months each year in Peru where he studies canopy birds in Manu Lodge in Manu National Park. In addition to his tropical studies, Paul specializes in studying and painting shorebirds and raptors. After a fall of hawkwatching in South Harpswell, Maine, Paul usually spends the winter in Machias, Maine, to paint birds until returning to Peru in the spring. His address is P.O. Box 554, Machias, ME 04654.

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