

## PEREGRINE FALCONS NESTING IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

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Thirty-nine years after the last Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) nest was documented in San Diego County, a pair has bred successfully on the Coronado Bay Bridge. Peregrines originally numbered between 100 and 300 nesting pairs in California with four to six pairs per year in San Diego County (Bond 1946, Cade et al. 1988). Prior to 1948 active nests existed at Point Loma, La Jolla cliffs, San Pasqual, and Morro Hill (collected eggs in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology), San Onofre (Dixon 1906), Pala and Santa Margarita river estuary (Dixon 1917), Escondido (Sharp 1919), and the nearby Los Coronados Islands (Howell 1910). In the 1950s, however, Peregrine numbers plummeted primarily because of egg shell thinning caused by widespread use of organochlorine pesticides, especially DDT (Hickey 1969, Ratcliffe 1980). The last recorded sign of a breeding Peregrine in San Diego was a single egg collected from a "sea wall" in 1950 (Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology). By 1970, the California Peregrine population had been reduced by over 95% to only two known nesting pairs, neither in San Diego (Herman 1971).

On 14 April 1989 I found a Peregrine Falcon nest under the eastern, or San Diego, portion of the Coronado Bay Bridge, the bridge that crosses San Diego Bay and joins San Diego with Coronado. After notifying California Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials of the discovery, I obtained permission from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to be escorted along the catwalk beneath the bridge to investigate the status of the nest. On 18 April 1989 I observed four nestlings from a ledge beneath the catwalk, and estimated that they were one and a half to two weeks old. Photographs of the nest and young were taken with a Nikon FM camera equipped with a 1600-mm lens and Kodak T-Max 3200 film pushed to 12,800 ASA. Photographs of the adults (Figure 1) were taken with Kodak Ektar 1000 film. Photographs are on file at the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group (SCPBRG) University of California, Santa Cruz, and the San Diego Natural History Museum.

On 20 April 1989 I arranged for a representative from the Peregrine Fund, Dan Brimm, to meet with Caltrans officials to view the nest and recommend a management plan. As a result, the portion of catwalk nearest the nest was closed.

Photographs of the adult female showed a scarred right eye, a USFWS aluminum band, and a defunct leg-mounted radio transmitter, positively identifying the bird as one released by SCPBRG at Point Loma in 1986. As part of a joint reintroduction program with the Peregrine Fund, SCPBRG released 12 Peregrines, all of which reached independence, at Point Loma between 1982 and 1988 (Linthicum 1989, Brian Walton pers. comm.). The male was unbanded and very pale.

The nest was on the east-facing, or leeward, side of bridge support tower number 31 approximately 90 feet above ground level. It was a scrape in what appeared to be 1 inch of pigeon feces and accumulated dust. The ledge was about 12 to 14 inches wide and 6 feet long. The nest was visible only from a single point beneath the catwalk, 196 feet away, and was inaccessible without specialized equipment.

On 14 May 1989 two of the four young, both males, fledged successfully. A third, the only female, fledged and collided with the San Diego Trolley. It suffered only superficial damage and was placed on the catwalk beneath the bridge near the nest ledge the following day. Two days later one of the juvenile males failed in an attempt to land atop the nesting tower and slid down the concrete face to the ground. The bird suffered a broken wing. The wing was taped by veterinarians at the San Diego Zoo and the bird was shipped to SCPBRG for rehabilitation. The fourth young, also male, fledged on 20 May. The three remaining young were fed for several weeks by the adults and appeared to reach independence (Dan Brimm pers. comm., pers. obs.).

## NOTES

The pair of adults returned to the Coronado Bridge in 1990 and hatched three young. During early May (before the 11th; exact date lost, John P. Reiger pers. comm.), one of the young, a male, was struck by a vehicle crossing the bridge. It was killed on impact. Philip Unitt prepared it as a study skin and partial skeleton, catalogue number 46702, San Diego Natural History Museum. On 10 May, a second young, a female, either fledged prematurely or fell from the nest and landed on the ground. It was taken to the San Diego Zoo where tests revealed no injuries. The following day, the third young, a female, also left the nest and fell to the ground. The two surviving young were taken to SCPBRG, then released in Yosemite National Park on 20 May. After release, one was killed by a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) prior to reaching complete independence; the other one dispersed (Linthicum and Walton 1990).

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Figure 1. Female Peregrine Falcon that nested at San Diego in 1989 and 1990, identified as one of three released in 1986 at Point Loma, only four miles from the nesting site, by its USFWS band, leg-mounted radio transmitter, and scarred right eye.

*Photo by Mike Couffer*

## NOTES

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