

Seattle Peregrines, 2006: An Update

by Ruth Taylor, Master Birder,
Class of 1990 and Coordinator
of the Seattle Peregrine Project

Use of the pesticide DDT caused widespread decline in Peregrine populations. In the post-DDT era, it was still rare to see a Peregrine Falcon in Seattle, but sightings have gradually increased as the population has recovered. By the winter of 1990-1991, an adult female had established a winter territory in downtown Seattle, and the next year another adult female claimed a winter territory on the Ship Canal. Reports of wintering birds in other areas of Seattle increased. And in 1994, a pair finally nested on a downtown skyscraper. Peregrines had made a phenomenal comeback.

By 1999, Peregrines had recovered to the extent that they were taken off the Endangered Species List. They are regularly found in appropriate habitat in Seattle today.

Please turn to pages 8 and 9, to learn more about the Seattle Peregrines.



USFWS Craig Koppe



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Program

The Great Heron Update With Heron Habitat Helpers and Herons Forever

Thursday, October 19, 2006
Center for Urban Horticulture
Free and open to the public!

Join us for an evening to learn about local Great Blue Heron colonies. We'll view the work of two photographers and hear reports on the local heronries. Morey Wetherald will present—with a bit of humor—his show about how this great bird lives. We'll hear from representatives of Heron Habitat Helpers and Herons Forever. Mike Hamilton will show stunning images from the Black River in Renton and other sites.

Come early and view displays from Heron Habitat Helpers and Herons Forever. Doors open at 6:30PM with refreshments and Nature Shop selections. The Center for Urban Horticulture is located at 3501 NE 41st Street in the Laurelhurst neighborhood. From NE 45th Street, turn south on Mary Gates Memorial Drive to NE 41st Street. Buses #25 and #30 stop at NE 45th and Mary Gates Memorial Drive.



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Identification: Who's Who?

Captive-bred or born in the wild?

Captive-bred Peregrines were never released in Seattle, and none of the birds that frequented Seattle in the early '90s was banded, so their origins are unknown.

VID bands

Birds banded in Seattle and in the San Juan Islands, usually as nestlings, and many Oregon birds have a VID (Visual Identification) band on one leg and a US Fish and Wildlife Service aluminum band on the other. The VID bands are black, with a white alphanumeric combination that can be read with a spotting scope. It is because of VID bands that we know the origins and history of many of our resident birds.

If you spot a Peregrine—dead or alive—and have a chance to read its leg-band, please report it to the Seattle Peregrine Project hotline, 206-654-4423.

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Beginnings

The first breeding pair of Peregrines in Seattle nested downtown on the Washington Mutual Tower in 1994, and this site was active except in 1999, 2003, and 2005. A new pair nested there this year. In addition to the WaMu site, there were five other active breeding sites in 2006, all on bridges. A grain elevator site where a pair had nested in 2003, 2004, and 2005 was inactive. One bridge has no nest box; another has a box on an adjacent structure, which the birds did not use; and another has a box, but the birds used the supporting ledge instead.

The Next Nest

After the first nest was established in 1994, the Seattle Peregrine population consisted of the resident downtown pair and a predominately female population wintering in areas with high concentrations of pigeons

Peregrine Falcon

and other avian prey. There were few sightings in summer.

A second nest was active in 1999. A pair of unbanded adults hatched young on a bridge, but the nest was predated, probably by a Great Horned Owl, after which both adults vacated the site that fall. Since then, two different females have held that territory, but they appeared to share a common problem—a mate that probably had another nest elsewhere with his alpha female. Last year the current female finally had a full-time mate, and the result was four beautiful young. This unbanded pair was also successful this year.

The Other Nests

Females that survive to be breeding birds generally disperse farther from their natal areas than males. Offspring from the Washington Mutual nest certainly illustrate this. The only female known to survive to breeding age was a hatch-year-2000 bird found dead at her nest site in the San Juan Islands in 2004. Any other surviving females presumably are nesting in areas where no one has been able to identify them. But at least some males have stayed closer to home.

A male from the WaMu nest of 2001 can see his natal “cliff” every day from his Ship Canal territory. He was a juvenile when he first attempted to nest in 2002, although his mate, from a now-defunct nuclear power plant in Oregon, was a year older. Juvenile males seldom are mature enough to breed successfully; he was not an exception. However, this pair has successfully fledged young every year since 2004. Their two-year-old son dispersed only a few miles away along the Ship Canal to breed this year at a new site. His mate, also hatch-year 2004, is from a nest on a crane in Olympia.

Another male, fledged from the WaMu nest in 2002 and now dead, bred successfully on a bridge on the east side of Lake Washington, first as a juvenile in 2003 and again in 2004; his mate is from Portland and a year older. She is still there, but her current mate's origin is unknown. They failed last year and were successful this year.

A pair of unbanded adults fledged one young from another new bridge site. They did not use a nest box that was available on a nearby structure.

This spring, we finally confirmed that an adult male breeding in the Bremerton area is a hatch-year-1995 male from the WaMu nest, now 11 years old. He spent his first two years in Seattle before moving out of the area.

The two unbanded adults breeding at the WaMu Tower this year fledged a male



and a female, but the young male died the day of his first flight. They are probably the same birds that attempted to nest on the IBM building in 2005. Time will tell if they have the longevity and success of their predecessors.

Fledgling Problems and Mortality

It is not surprising that Peregrines are attracted to bridges. Bridges host abundant numbers of pigeons and other avian prey, and provide shelter from the elements and, usually, a place to lay eggs. But Peregrines aren't able to anticipate problems: eggs may crack when incubated on too rough a substrate; a crevice may be too small for developing young to have sufficient room to flap their wings in preparation for their first flights; and young birds may fledge into the water or into traffic.

Juveniles have a high mortality rate, regardless of whether they nest in the wild or in urban areas. Mammals and avian predators may prey on eggs and young at cliff sites, and some ledges also are vulnerable to flooding. The most common causes of death for Seattle fledglings and juveniles have been window strikes, collisions with vehicles, and disease. Pigeons have their revenge: these favored prey items carry "frounce," avian trichomoniasis, which is fatal to young birds unless treated soon enough. Naïve young birds may end up in unusual places. This year, a recently fledged youngster landed atop a slow moving train, but an alert observer got an engineer to flush the bird while it was still close to home. In downtown Seattle, a fledgling entered a FedEx store, much to the amazement of the staff and customers. Both the birds escaped harm, but not all young birds are so lucky.

What's Next?

How many more pairs of Peregrines will breed in Seattle? There is sufficient food for additional pairs, but they will probably be limited by the availability of nest

sites and by their own territoriality. While humans can sometimes assist in providing nest sites, we can't do anything about the territoriality that is as much a part of a Peregrine as its beauty. We may see serious conflicts over nest sites similar to those that have occurred in other cities. The population increase of this spectacular avian predator has been fascinating to witness. Who knows what their distribution will look like in ten or fifteen years?



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Stewart feeds eyases

The History of the WaMu Nest

In March 1994, two observers independently discovered an adult male and a juvenile female courting on the Washington Mutual Tower in downtown Seattle. Washington Mutual Bank and the Wright Runstad and Company property management firm allowed the Falcon Research Group to install a nest box on a high ledge and focus a video camera on the birds. After the pair (named Stewart and Virginia, for downtown streets) laid eggs, they became a media sensation, and viewers flocked to the lobby of the WaMu tower to watch them on a monitor.

Unfortunately, it was a rough season for the Peregrine family and their human fans. Virginia died after hitting a window when her three chicks were still tiny, and a three-week-old chick died on the ledge. However, thanks to a great deal of human intervention, including a temporary chick swap, single dad Stewart fledged two young successfully.

That August, a female in fresh adult plumage with a few remnant juvenile feathers appeared downtown and immediately formed a pair bond with Stewart. The following spring, they nested successfully. This female, Bell, fledged 26 young during her years at the WaMu Tower, and some of her descendants now nest in Seattle. Her last nesting season was in 2004. She died in July 2005, about two blocks from her home territory.