

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*



Folk Name: Duck Hawk

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor, casual Breeder

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Open country, fields, pastures, open water; also urban buildings and ledges for roosting and nesting

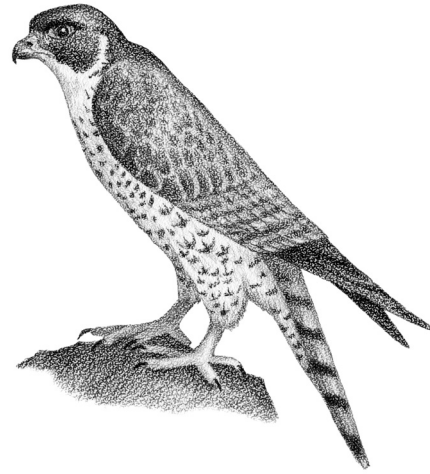
The Peregrine Falcon is a spectacular predator renowned for its speed, tenacity, and skill in capturing other birds in flight. It has been prized for use in the sport of falconry for hundreds of years. This powerful flier has been estimated diving at speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour to capture its prey. In the eastern United States, its natural habitat is steep, mountain cliffs, spread wide with “open gulfs of air.”

“Virginia naturalists have completed speed tests which show the duck hawk, at 180 miles per hour, to be king of the feathered speedsters and a close second to the modern airplane for the air speed record.”

—*Statesville Daily Record*, January 25, 1938

In 1886, famed ornithologist William Brewster conducted an “ornithological reconnaissance” of birds in the mountains of North Carolina and wrote: “Nearly every suitable cliff on the higher mountains was occupied by a pair of these noisy Falcons,” and “[t]he mountaineers say that the same birds breed in the same places many years in succession.” However, in 1919, North Carolina ornithologists noted the Peregrine Falcon as a rare bird in the summer, with confirmed records from only Buncombe and Surry County. Later, in 1942, they concluded that “some probably breed” in the mountains. By 1957, seventy-one years after Brewster’s visit to the state, the last active Peregrine Falcon eyrie known in North Carolina was lost, and within a few years, the entire breeding population of this falcon was extirpated from the eastern United States. In 1958, Kay Curtis Sisson, editor of *The Chat*, lamented the loss of the Peregrine Falcon in the Carolinas writing: “Unfortunately, even though a rare hawk, the Peregrine has no legal protection in either of our states. The damage falcons do to waterfowl is so minute in the over-all picture that we should be glad to sacrifice a few ducks just to be able to see one of these grandly noble creatures once in a while.” That same year, William McIlwaine’s friend, Dr. J.J. Murray expressed this sentiment about the possible loss of the Peregrine in a brief essay in *The Chat*:

I have been thinking of him as a Symbol. In his grace and power, in his skill, he is the symbol of all that is beautiful and exciting in the world around us. He is the Symbol of Wild America, elemental



and untamed, symbol of the delight in beauty, symbol of the freedom to which we must hold, if life is to continue to have in it any simplicity and any zest. ...[The Peregrine is a] [s]ymbol of God’s first and simplest gifts, the Nature from which we have come, and to which, if all our hope of advancement in intelligence and in spirituality are to be realized, we must continue to hold fast.

Thankfully, the recent history of the Peregrine Falcon is a true conservation success story. One primary cause of this falcon’s dramatic population decline across the North American continent was the buildup (biomagnification) of DDT and other chemical contaminants in the food chain which ultimately led to reproductive failure. The shells of the female’s eggs became so brittle and thin, they would simply crack, and no viable young could be raised. The protection of the Peregrine became a priority for biologists across America in the late 1950s and 1960s. The Peregrine Fund was founded in 1970, and the Peregrine Falcon was officially declared an endangered species that year. This designation afforded it protection at both the state and federal levels. A massive campaign was initiated to re-establish this bird in the wild. Millions of dollars of research combined with breeding and hacking efforts resulted in the re-establishment of the Peregrine in many of its historic nesting areas. A reintroduction effort in North Carolina conducted from 1984 to 1997 was successful. Reintroduced birds successfully nested at Table Rock in South Carolina as well. By 1998, the Peregrine was breeding successfully once again across much of the United States, and it was officially “de-listed” at the federal level in 1999. In North Carolina, the breeding population

is still listed as endangered, and the species still receives full legal protection here.

There have been more than 50 reports of Peregrine Falcons in the Central Carolinas. Almost all were seen during migration or the winter months. About 85% of these sightings have been reported since 1990. The earliest recorded account in the region is a falcon James Carson watched chasing a Mallard along Sugar Creek in Charlotte in 1945. Almost 20 years later on September 30, 1962, H. Lee Jones reported another Peregrine in Mecklenburg County, but this time the falcon was seen in pursuit of a flock of European Starlings. On December 29, 1977, one was reported by observers on the Chester CBC. In 1984, a Peregrine Falcon was shot in the Town of Matthews, and the injured bird was turned over to staff at the “fledgling” Carolina Raptor Center for treatment. Barton Rope sighted one in Shelby in Cleveland County on February 6, 1987.

The word Peregrine is derived from the Latin word for “wanderer,” and in 1989, a young male falcon wandered out of the mountains of Tennessee into the “urban canyons” of Charlotte. The bird settled in the city for a while and created lots of excitement as it hunted pigeons and other prey from the tops of the tallest skyscrapers in downtown. Nancy Cook first sighted this falcon around April 10, 1989. Many residents were able to watch this powerful predator at work hunting pigeons and starlings

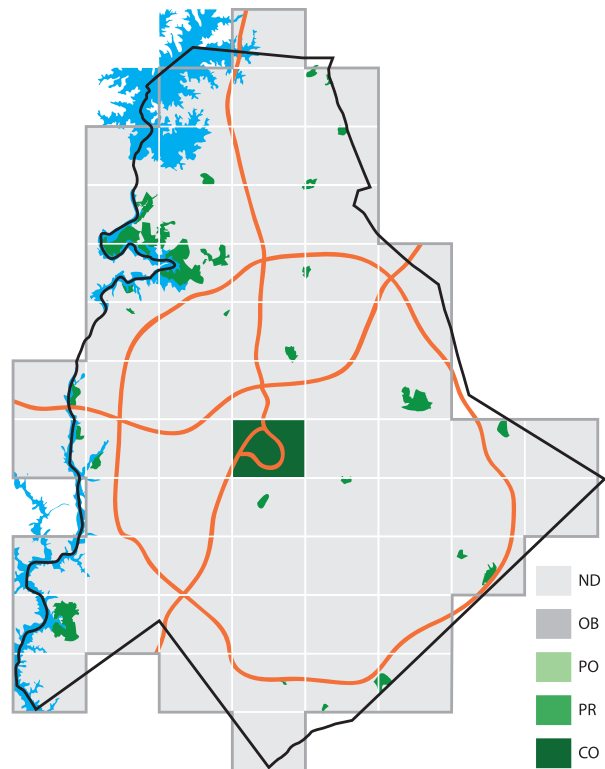
over the buildings, streets, and highways in the center city. The young Peregrine was seen in July and then regularly by many observers that fall. Some observers felt it may possibly have been joined by a second falcon for a short time and there was speculation that the bird might have attempted to nest.

In addition to this bird, later that fall, an adult migrant “duck hawk” wowed Audubon members attending a Saturday field trip at the Cook Farm, outside of the Town of Huntersville, when they were treated to a spectacular sight at one of the farm’s ponds. The Peregrine flew in fast, directly above the group, and then dramatically dropped in a powerful dive coming in very low, skimming over the heads of a small flock of very frightened ducks sitting on the water. The ducks held their ground and never flushed, but they all craned their heads low and sideways as the falcon buzzed by, just above them, at full speed. The startled birders spontaneously erupted into cheers.

The young male falcon remained in Charlotte over the winter and was regularly seen from the end of January through February 1990. Word quickly spread that North Carolina had its first “urban” falcon and Allen Boynton, a biologist with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, followed up to determine the origin of this bird. He was able to confirm that the bird was banded and successfully tracked the band number. He discovered it had been released as a fledgling in the spring of 1989 near Wolf Laurel, NC, as part of a multi-state hacking



Peregrine Falcon at Charlotte nest site. (Jeff Maw)



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)

program. The year-old falcon appears to have left town sometime in March of 1990, and his ultimate fate remains unknown.

A female Peregrine Falcon that birders nicknamed “Gladys” wintered in downtown Charlotte for at least eight consecutive winters from 2006 to 2013. Local office workers watched each year as the bird hunted pigeons and roosted on the skyscrapers near the corner of 3rd Street and College Street. It was often seen roosting about 15 stories up around the Hilton Hotel sign. Gladys usually arrived about the second week of October (10th) and usually departed around the middle of March (15th).

In March 2013, Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas biologists were both surprised and delighted when a pair of Peregrine Falcons showed up, built a nest, and successfully hatched young on the balcony of the

40th floor of a skyscraper in the middle of downtown Charlotte. This was the first nesting of Peregrine Falcon ever documented outside of the mountains in the Carolinas. At first, everyone thought that Gladys had found a mate, but photographs and video recorded at the nest showed this female bird was banded. The band number was traced, and it was discovered she was banded as a hatchling in a nest on Holts Ledge, a cliff side in Lyme, New Hampshire, in 2010. Charlotte’s resident falcon pair successfully fledged young in 2013, 2014, and 2015, and nestlings were banded in 2015. In addition to a standard diet of Rock Pigeons, European Starlings, and House Sparrows, the adults caught and fed the young at least one Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Pileated Woodpecker, Blue Jay, and Northern Flicker. Unfortunately, in 2106, the nesting pair failed to return.