

# PEREGRINE FALCON

NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

*fact sheet, 2006*

A distinctive black cap with helmet-like markings on either side of its head and long pointed wings distinguish the peregrine falcon. It usually has a light-colored underside with a dark-bluish-gray back and wings.

Though relatively easy to recognize, the peregrine is a rare bird to see in the wild. Because populations of this species are low in North Carolina, the peregrine falcon is currently a state-listed endangered species.

For a medium sized bird, the peregrine falcon is a very fast and agile flyer. It has been known to reach speeds of up to 200 miles per hour in a dive! With very acute eyesight and amazing flying abilities, the peregrine falcon is adapted to feed on other birds such as blue jays, pigeons and waterfowl. It typically catches its prey in flight.

During mating season, the young male falcons attempt to attract a mate by displaying a series of acrobatics and somersaults in the air. Once the female has chosen her mate, they will remain a pair for life. Peregrine falcons prefer to nest on cliff ledges or rocky outcrops and will usually return to the same cliff or area every year. They will produce an average of three or four eggs every year.

## POPULATION DECLINE

One of the main factors in the decline of peregrine falcon populations in North Carolina was the use of pesticides such as DDT. This harmful toxin leached into our streams and contaminated many animals in the falcon's diet. Similar to the American bald eagle, peregrine falcons that ingested DDT produced soft-shelled eggs that broke during incubation. Before the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission began its restoration efforts, the last breeding pair was documented in North Carolina in 1957.

## RESTORATION EFFORTS

The Wildlife Commission took aggressive steps in peregrine falcon management in 1984, and



began a peregrine falcon hacking program to reintroduce captive raised peregrines into the wild in hopes of re-establishing a falcon population in our state. The Commission continued the hacking program until 1991 after a total of 80 juvenile peregrines had been released into the wild. The first territorial peregrine falcon pair was observed in 1986 to be joined by eight more over the next five years.

The peregrine population in our state seemed to be well on its way by 1991. But the number of territorial pairs began decreasing



Peregrine falcons occupy a high-altitude niche, nesting on mountain cliffs.

over the next four years until only four territorial pairs were left. The Commission released 12 more birds in 1996 and 1997 in order to bolster the existing population and to increase the population in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Since 1997, the peregrine population has continued to increase: From 2000 to 2003, 10 territorial falcon pairs were documented each year in North Carolina and produced an average of 14 fledglings each year. Although 2004 saw an increase to 11 pairs, only 10 returned in 2005. Commission biologists continue to monitor nesting sites with the help of volunteers. Monitored sites include those with previous nesting activity, those with suitable habitat and those with reported peregrine sightings.

### CLIFF SITE MANAGEMENT

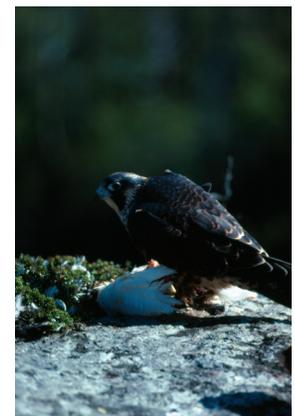
One of the greatest problems facing our peregrine falcon population in North Carolina is nesting success. Peregrine falcons form life-long pair bonds and return to the same areas every year to mate and nest. But peregrines tend to nest only once in a year. And if the nesting attempt fails or the birds are forced to abandon the nest, the pair may not nest again until the following year. To reduce nesting disturbances, the Commission works with cliff site landowners and rock climbers to manage cliffs during the breeding season. The Commission also closes specific rock climbing routes near peregrine nesting areas to prevent human disturbance. Since peregrines are very territorial, each cliff site will support only one nesting pair. If that pair is disturbed and abandons the nest, the cliff is essentially unused habitat until the following year. Some climbing area closures are posted on the Web sites of rock climbing organizations to help increase



Commission biologists work high up North Carolina's mountains, checking nests for eggs or chicks, and occasionally examining an adult bird.

awareness of such closures. Commission biologists have coordinated with other public landowners like the U.S. Forest Service to re-route hiking trails near nesting sites in order to prevent human disturbance.

Effective conservation management has successfully established a peregrine falcon population in western North Carolina. With continued efforts, the peregrine falcon population in our state will continue to rise. In 1999, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service removed the peregrine falcon from the federal Endangered Species list. However, the peregrine still remains protected under the North Carolina Endangered Species law and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918.



The peregrine falcon's amazing speed and agility enable it to prey on other birds.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Limit the use of pesticides and herbicides whenever possible to reduce the risk of water pollution.
2. When rock climbing in North Carolina, avoid posted closed areas during the peregrine's breeding season.
3. Educate yourself and others about peregrine falcon biology and conservation efforts.
4. Join a conservation organization to help support peregrine falcon restoration in North Carolina.
5. Donate to the N.C. Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund.

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