



Peregrine Falcon

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Aves
 Order: Falconiformes
 Family: Falconidae
 Genus: *Falco*
 Species: *peregrinus*



Photo courtesy of Janet Wisneski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Peregrine falcons are found worldwide, except for rainforests and cold dry Arctic regions. They require large open spaces for hunting and usually inhabit areas near water such as grasslands, tundra, and meadows. They have recently begun to colonize urban areas because of the abundance of pigeons as prey items.
- **Exhibit Location:** bird exhibit outside pole barn

Characteristics

- Length: 16-20 inches; Weight: 22-32 ounces (females larger than males); Wingspan: 36-44 inches
- The head, back and wings of the peregrine falcon are mostly slate black or dark brown with a dark wedge below the eye. The throat and upper chest are buff-colored along with the sides of the neck. The feathers covering the belly, upper legs and tail are barred. Like all falcons, the wings are long and pointed, and the tail is slim and short.
- Peregrines have keen vision allowing them to see small prey from far away and the ability to fly at high speed to capture them. A system of baffles (screen-like components that change the air flow) in the nostrils assists in their breathing during these high-speed dives.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** up to 13 years; **In Captivity** 13 to 20 years (record is 25 years)

Behaviors

- Peregrine falcons are diurnal (active during the daytime). When not breeding, they are mainly solitary (live alone) and establish and defend territories.
- Peregrines are migratory and fly long distances between their breeding and winter ranges. Those that breed on the tundras of Alaska and Canada migrate to central Argentina and Chile, traveling along sea coasts, long lake shores, barrier islands, mountain ranges, or at sea.
- Peregrines hunt most often from a high perch, diving at their prey, and catching them in mid-flight. They have been clocked at speeds of over 180 miles per hour.
- They use a variety of vocalizations at different stages of life, but mainly during the breeding season. Most vocalizations are between mated pairs, parents and offspring, or in defensive behaviors. Posturing communicates aggression (feathers raised and bill gaping) and submission (feathers tight to the body, head held down with the beak turned away).
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** insects

Reproduction

- Female peregrines begin breeding at 3 years of age; males at 4 years.
- Courtship begins in the fall with males performing complex courtship flights for their chosen mate. Peregrine falcons mate for life.
- Their nest preference is overhanging cliffs but nesting habitats are highly variable including trees and man-made structures like towers, tall bridges and the ledges of tall buildings. They often return to the same nest sites year after year. Nesting sites (aeries) are chosen for their inaccessibility to predators, proximity to water, and availability of prey.

- Breeding season begins in March and extends into May, depending on the latitude. The female lays 2-6 eggs (1 every 48 hours). Both parents incubate the eggs, although the female spends more time doing so. The male also spends time feeding the female. The eggs hatch in mid-June.
- Both parents care for the young while the young are unable to fly.
- The young birds begin to fly at about 35-45 days of age. As they become better at flying, the parents deliver prey by dropping them in the air. The young then pursue the dead prey in the air.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** pigeons, seabirds, shorebirds, songbirds, bats, rodents, reptiles
- **At the Zoo:** rats, quail

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** LC (Least Concern); **CITES:** not listed
- In 1984 peregrine falcons were federally listed as Endangered. DDT was the primary reason for the decline of the peregrine falcon. DDT has been proven to reduce the birds' ability to produce eggshells with sufficient calcium to prevent the shells from breaking or cracking under the weight of the incubating parent. With the ban on DDT, reintroduction programs became viable and with their success, the peregrine falcon was removed from the endangered list in 1999.
- Reintroduction activities included the taking of eggs from captive-bred adults and placing them in boxes until they were ready to fledge. These chicks were reintroduced in historic areas where populations had been eliminated. It was also determined urban areas with a ready supply of prey were ideal areas for reintroduction programs.
- Predators: great horned owls, golden eagles, gyrfalcons, bears, wolverines, foxes

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The species name *peregrinus* is Latin for "wandering" or "pilgrim".
- Peregrine falcons are perhaps the fastest animals on earth.
- Peregrine falcons have been a favorite choice of falconers (people who train falcons to hunt other birds) because of their great agility and ability for high speed.
- There are an estimated 1,650 breeding pairs in the United States and Canada.
- Syracuse, NY has a breeding pair of peregrine falcons nesting in the downtown area.

Sources:

- Defenders of Wildlife, Peregrine falcon *falco peregrinus*. Retrieved June 11, 2006, from Defenders of Wildlife Kids' Planet Web site: <http://www.kidsplanet.org/factsheets/peregrinefalcon.html>.
- Dewey, T. and M. Potter. 2002. "Falco peregrinus" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed June 21, 2005 at http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Falco_peregrinus.html.