Peregrine Falcon

(*Falco peregrinus*)—Endangered

Description

The peregrine is a relatively large falcon (16-20" tall) with a wingspan of 3 to 4 feet; all falcons are distinguished from other raptors by their pointed wings. Peregrine adults have a distinctive black "helmet" (black crown and back of neck with a black wedge extending below the eye). Adults also have a steel blue to black back with light horizontal barring across the chest and belly. Immatures have a brown "helmet" and back and have vertical streaks on the chin, chest and belly. Prairie Falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) are similar to immature peregrines but are usually a lighter brown and have distinctive black "armpits" (axillaries).

Distribution and Habitat

The subspecies which breeds in Utah is the American Peregrine Falcon (*F.p.anatum*); The Arctic subspecies (*F.p. tundrius*) occurs occasionally during the winter.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The nesting population in Utah is increasing and breeding sites occur in the Utah Mountain, Basin and Range, Mojave and Colorado Plateau ecoregions. The largest concentrations are along the Colorado River and its tributaries in the southeastern portion of the state. The historic distribution is well documented along the Wasatch Front, but is less well understood for the remote and rugged canyon country of southern Utah.

Peregrines nest on tall cliffs (usually below 6000 feet elevation) near and often directly above streams, rivers, or reservoirs, though some sites can be several miles from water. Nests are shallow scrapes placed in cracks, holes, and small caves on cliff faces. Peregrines forage on a variety of birds which are associated with open water, streamside, wetland, cliff, and open meadow habitats. Typical prey includes waterfowl, shorebirds, doves, swallows, swifts and meadowlarks.

Life History

While many peregrines migrate from Utah in the winter, some remain throughout the year. While nesting dates may vary across the state, courtship displays in the breeding area usually begin around late March and early April. In mid to late April, the female scrapes a shallow depression in which she lays 3 - 4 (sometimes 5) eggs. Incubation is done primarily by the female and lasts from 29 to 32 days. During the incubation period, the male frequently delivers food items to the female. Hatching usually occurs in late May; nestlings are tended by both adults and fledge when they are about 35 to 42 days old (June–July). Immatures may remain in the nest area until September or October, where they can be seen with the adults.

The timing of fall migration can vary with local conditions, but usually begins in late September or early October. Adults often migrate before immature birds. Wintering destinations also vary widely, with some peregrines remaining in Utah year-round. Most Utah migrants probably winter in the southwestern U.S. and portions of west Mexico, though some may travel as far as South America. Migrants may return to their Utah breeding grounds as early as February in some years.

Threats and Reasons for Decline

Peregrine populations declined dramatically in the 1940's-1960's. Much of the decline can be attributed to the effects of pesticide residues (particularly residues of organochlorines such as DDT) which caused egg shell thinning and lead to decreased productivity. Other factors that probably contributed to the population decline include climatic change (long-term drying of wetlands), botulism, and human disturbance (shooting, nest site disturbance, etc.).

Peregrine populations have rebounded since the late 1960's, particularly after 1985. This population recovery has been so dramatic that the species is currently being considered for delisting or downlisting (from Endangered to Threatened). In Utah, the number of nesting peregrines has increased greatly, and the distribution of peregrines has expanded. Some of the increase and expansion probably represents the discovery of previously unknown nesting areas.

Several threats still exist to the peregrine in Utah. The primary threat is loss of foraging habitat and disturbance of nests sites associated with urban encroachment along the Wasatch Front. Also, increased outdoor recreation poses a potential threat to nest sites even in remote locations of Utah. Outbreaks of botulism (a disease which can cause adult mortality) regularly occur in the state's wetlands, particularly around the Great Salt Lake. And, while the use of organochlorines has been banned on the breeding grounds, peregrines are exposed to a variety of pesticides, including organochlorines, on their wintering grounds. Several pesticides are used on breeding season foraging areas, and their influence on peregrine productivity is not well understood.

Recovery Efforts

The American Peregrine Falcon Rocky Mountain/Southwest Population Recovery Plan was published in 1984. This plan outlines the steps which need to be taken in order to recover the peregrine population in Utah and many other western states.

Utah has been very active in recovery efforts. Peregrine nest sites and adjacent habitats are protected and a significant portion of nest sites are monitored annually to determine occupancy and productivity (number of young produced). Peregrines have been reintroduced around the Great Salt Lake on a number of nesting towers (which are still maintained and regularly used by peregrines). Information on nest site locations, occupancy, and productivity is being compiled to determine the magnitude of the peregrine population increase in Utah. In addition, Utah is working closely with other southwestern states to assess the extent of population recovery. Utah's recovery efforts have been made possible through close coordination of several state and federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, universities, researchers, private corporations, and private landowners.

How You Can Help

You can help by reporting the location of peregrine nesting sites to regional Utah Division of Wildlife Resources offices; if the nest is on federal land, you can report the site to the local office of the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, or U.S. Forest Service. If you see an adult peregrine fly into a crack or cave in a tall (>100 ft) cliff during the spring or summer, it is likely a nesting site. Also, nestling peregrines can often be observed standing on the cliff face near the nest site.

If you find an injured falcon, contact your local Utah Division of Wildlife Resources office. They will help recover the birds and find the nearest raptor rehabilitator. If you find a dead peregrine or witness a shooting or other illegal activity, contact any state or federal law enforcement office and notify them of its location. You should not pick up a dead falcon since it may have been poisoned.

Where To Learn More

Several books on Peregrine Falcons and raptors are available at bookstores and libraries. These range from technical to general accounts. Other educational materials such as video tapes and CD ROMs are available through specialty (nature) bookstores and (wild) bird shops. Web sites can be found by searching for the keywords "Peregrine Falcons," "falcons," "hawks," "raptors," and "birds of prey."

For More Information

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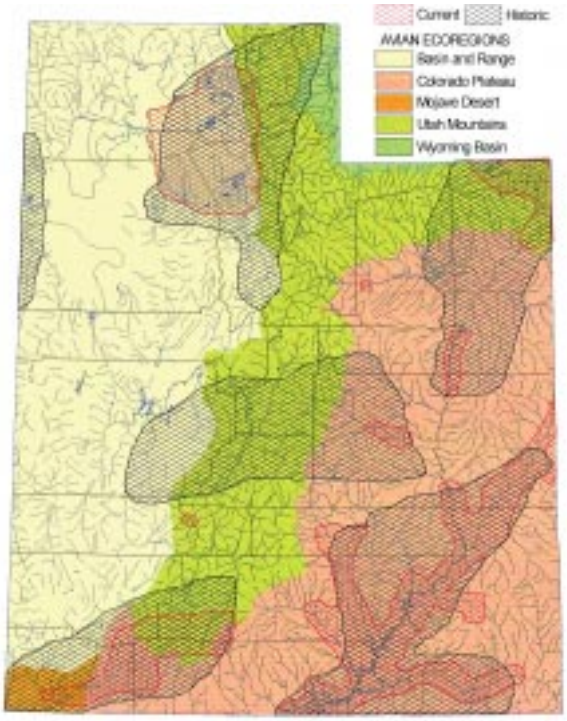

Peregrine Falcon distribution.

Peregrine Falcon habitat photo courtesy of Gar Workman.

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