30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

# PEREGRINE FALCON

Peregrine falcons were listed as endangered in 1970 and removed from the list in August 1999. Though considered fully recovered, peregrine falcons will continue to be monitored under the Endangered Species Act through 2013.

## HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

Before 1940, there were an estimated 3,875 pairs of breeding peregrine falcons in North America. As many as 350 pairs were estimated to exist in the eastern United States. In the 1940s, however, peregrine falcons started suffering significant declines due to indiscriminate use of the pesticide DDT.


In the 1800s and early 1900s, prior to the DDT-induced decline, eastern peregrine populations began to decline primarily due to egg collection, nestling collection, and intentional shooting. Shooting of adult peregrines was thought to have caused the most significant mortality in most areas, but in some states biologists estimated that egg collectors reduced populations by as much as 33 percent. For example, at least 49 clutches were taken from one Massachusetts nesting site from 1864 to 1931, and as many as three clutches were taken in one breeding season.

By 1970, only 10 to 20 percent of the historical falcon population remained. Although the decline was nearly global, the eastern U.S. and European populations suffered the greatest losses. A 1964 survey documenting the decline in North America did not find a single occupied cliff in the eastern states or Canadian maritime provinces.

Modern threats to peregrines are direct human disturbance to nesting birds, trauma from collisions with vehicles and aircraft, environmental contamination, and loss of habitat.

## ROAD TO RECOVERY

The pesticide DDT was banned in 1972, a few years after the peregrine was listed as an endangered species. Without the threat of DDT and with the protection of the Endangered Species Act, there was hope for re-establishing peregrines.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and its recovery teams produced four regional recovery plans. Each plan included the release of captive-bred young to historic nesting sites (excluding Alaska), the protection and enhancement of critical breeding and wintering habitat, increasing and maintaining productivity in the wild, preventing human disturbance to nesting sites, and identifying causes of mortality and reduced productivity.

Reintroduction continued during the 1990s. A total of 6,000 peregrines were released in 34 states from 1974 to 1997.

## CONSERVATION TODAY

By 1997, there were more than 1,400 pairs of peregrines maintaining breeding territories in North America, more than double the original recovery goal of 631 pairs. These recovery efforts were deemed so successful that the FWS removed the peregrine falcon from the list of endangered species in August 1999.

## ECOLOGICAL VALUE

As a top predator in its ecosystem, the peregrine falcon helps to control populations of its prey species, mostly smaller birds, and keep the ecosystem in balance.

The falcon's rapid decline after the widespread use of DDT also identifies the species as an indicator of environmental health.

## OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Since the peregrine is no longer protected by the Endangered Species Act, there is no federal law that protects peregrine breeding habitat. States are continuing to try to minimize disturbance at nesting sites and protect habitat for the long term, but there is no federal law backing these protections.

Following the final rule to delist the peregrine falcon nationwide, the Fish and Wildlife Service developed a post-delisting monitoring plan, which addresses issues such as harvesting for falconry and the use of falcons in sample surveys to monitor population trends.

The monitoring plan is meant to ensure that healthy falcon populations are maintained. Unfortunately, the population assessments that warrant the take of the chicks for falconry were derived from outdated data that may allow too many chicks to be taken. As a result, falcon counts in Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah have indicated that peregrine numbers are on the decline.