



Resources of the Rivers

Peregrine Falcon Monitoring Program

STATUS

The peregrine falcon is a species of special concern in West Virginia. This bird of prey was listed as a federally endangered species due to severe population declines stemming from the bioaccumulation of the pesticide DDT, which was used during the post WWII era. By the mid-1960s, no peregrines were found to be breeding east of the Mississippi River and the western populations were in steep decline. At present time, populations are considered stable to increasing. Although the falcon was delisted in August of 1999, eastern populations are still low and breeding pairs are rare in West Virginia.

HABITAT

The type of habitat this falcon prefers consists of cliff areas, high rock outcrops, and in recent years, bridges and skyscrapers. The peregrine prefers areas with open expanse in order to capture prey such as birds, insects and even small mammals. The peregrine can reach speeds of over 200 miles per hour when capturing prey and is known for its spectacular aerial displays. Peregrines will nest on small ledges in cliff areas that are not accessible to ground predators. Nests can be described as well-rounded scrapes with surrounding accumulated debris. The male will do most of the hunting during incubation and throughout the brooding period. Males and females will roost together during other times of the year.



Nestling peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*), or eyasses, in their hack box on the cliff at New River Gorge National River.

RECOVERY EFFORTS

In 1987, the National Park Service, in cooperation with the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources and the Peregrine Fund, began a four year restoration program at New River Gorge National River. This program consisted of “hacking” young peregrine falcons that were acquired from the western United States. “Hacking” refers to placing young falcons in an artificial structure and caring for them in a manner that minimizes human exposure until they fledge and are released from the structure, or hack box. The goal of this reintroduction program was to restore peregrine falcons to their native habitat in the eastern United States. There were a total of 30 chicks hacked from 1987 to 1990. Only two chicks were known to have died in this entire project. Although there was not any documented nest-

ing in subsequent years, peregrines, including banded birds released here, were seen returning the following years.

The staff at New River Gorge National River continued to do surveys and monitor for returning peregrines up to 1995. At this time, monitoring efforts were reduced to a one day “Cliffwatch” held in cooperation with the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources. There were a number of possible sightings and confirmed sightings after 1995, but nesting was never confirmed in the gorge.

In 2001 intensive monitoring was picked up again and in 2005 efforts by the College of William and Mary resulted in the identification of New River Gorge National River as a top restoration area for peregrines in



Volunteers and park employees placing a "hack box" on the cliffs at New River Gorge National River.



New River Gorge National River
Bluestone National Scenic River
Gauley River NRA

P.O. Box 246
Glen Jean, WV 25846
304-465-0508
www.nps.gov/neri

Resources for More Information:

New River Gorge National River Staff:

Scott Stonum - Resource Management
Mark Graham - Wildlife Biologist 304-465-6542
Sandstone Visitor Center - 466-0417
Canyon Rim Visitor Center - 574-2115

Documents and Websites:

2006 Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)
Restoration Project Summary; Program
Report NPS/NER/NERI--1419-06PF

Three Rivers Avian Center, Brooks Mountain Road, Brooks, WV 25951, www/tracwv.org

College of William and Mary's Center for Conservation Biology--Falcon Tracking, reached through www/tracwv.org on Restoration Project page

Cornell Lab of Ornithology. www.birds.cornell.edu

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- "Birds, Birds, Birds", www.birds.fws.gov

the East. This promoted the initiation of a multi-state, multi-agency, cooperative effort to "hack" falcons in the gorge. The project is slated to continue until 2010 with an annual target release of 15-25 falcons, and a long-term objective to establish adult nesting peregrine falcons within New River Gorge National River and the Gauley River National Recreation Area.

The young falcons, or eyasses, are brought to New River from bridge nests spread across coastal Virginia, New Jersey, and/or Pennsylvania. These nests exhibit poor survival rates due to premature fledging over open water resulting in drowning and also due to vehicle collisions on the bridge surface. Thus bridge-reared falcons are ideal candidates for a hacking program.

The first three years of this renewed effort, 2006-2008, placed hack boxes on the cliffs in the north end of New River Gorge National River, and released 15, 24, and 23 young peregrines into the skies of the gorge over those three years. The program generated much excitement with the implementation of solar powered video camera monitoring, the placement of satellite transmitters on 6 of the 2007 birds, and the highest documented rate of success since national recovery efforts were initiated in the 1970s. However, it was the discovery of a pair of falcons returning in the spring of 2009, and exhibiting courtship behaviors, that hit the pinnacle of measured success!

Observation of the amorous activities of the pair established that they had indeed picked out a place to raise their young, very near to where the banded bird of the pair had been released in a previous year (colored and numbered bands on their legs identify each hacked bird as a specific individual). The arrival of a breeding pair to the north end of the park prompted the relocation of the hack sites to Grandview—far enough south so as not to encroach upon the territory of the new couple.

Even without territorial disputes to hamper the pair, the nest did not yield any successful fledglings in 2009. However, the hack sites at Grandview were a huge success. 17 more falcons were successfully hacked from this new location that offers easily accessible points along the Grandview Rim Trail from which to observe the antics of these incredible creatures. Watch for developments in 2010 when Grandview is again home to eyasses that will be brought to New River Gorge for the final year of this reintroduction program.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn about how you can make a difference in bird conservation by visiting educational sites on the web, attending educational programs, and participating in "citizen science" projects.

Visit Three Rivers Avian Center website for more information not only on their extraordinary efforts with this project, but also on their dedication to education with their West Virginia Birds of Prey Educational Outreach Programs.



Newly fledged falcon prepares for flight