

## Peregrine Falcon

Peregrine Falcons are occasionally seen in the lighthouse area of Point Reyes as they soar and hunt or as they perch on the cliff face. They are wonderful to spot and watch, and visitors are always thrilled to see them and to learn more about them. Hopefully this article will give you some general information to share with visitors when you do spot one or both of the Peregrines who live in this area. In terms of a very quick description, they are slightly larger than a crow, 15-20" (females are larger than males), with the characteristic pointed wings, narrow tail and quick wing beats of a falcon. They are dark on the upper parts, with a dramatic facial pattern, which is easily seen even at a distance: they have a black wedge which extends below the eye, forming a very distinctive helmet. Consult a field guide for a more detailed description of adults and juveniles. The purpose of this article is to describe their behaviors, especially ones we might see here in the lighthouse area, and a bit about their history and ranges.

More than any other raptor, the Peregrine Falcon is extremely fast and agile, and is specialized for catching aerial birds. Although Peregrines can attack from a stationary position, they actually prefer their prey to be on the wing, and if the prey is small, Peregrines may also pluck and eat them in flight. As The Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas states:

These swift, spirited falcons inhabit open country, where their speed and feather-raising pursuit dives strike fear in the hearts of the avian populace. Peregrines hunt in the air – over oceans, forests and woodlands, marshes and wetlands, chaparral and cities – and very rarely take ground prey.  
(p. 154)

In fact, they often pursue flying birds even when they have already had their fill, seemingly for the “pleasure of the chase” or perhaps to perfect their hunting skills. In level flight, Peregrines fly at 25 to 30 mph, usually not exceeding 60 mph. But when launching an attack from above a target, the Peregrine’s downward plunge can exceed 240 mph! These falcons can also spiral upward and seize the prey from below, especially if the prey bird has managed to escape the falcon’s first pass. If the prey falls to the ground or is a larger bird, the falcon may eat it there or carry it to a perch. Coastal Peregrines often specialize on seabirds during the breeding season and on shorebirds and waterfowl in winter. They usually try to flush standing or swimming birds before seizing them. If pursuing a bird at sea, Peregrines may wait overhead and pick up the prey after it is exhausted from diving repeatedly trying to escape. Mated pairs also may hunt cooperatively. They sometimes steal fish from Osprey or food from other raptors, or they might catch a bat or an insect, but the Peregrine’s chief prey is whatever midsize bird is locally available.

Peregrines have a worldwide range, and they are seen year-round along the west coast from the Aleutians to Mexico, and in inland California and across Mexico. They also breed, in North America, across the Arctic, in the Rocky Mountains, and along the northeastern seaboard. Peregrines have spectacular courtship flight displays. They traditionally nest on ledges and cliff sites, but now are also established in cities, nesting on bridges and tall buildings. No actual nest is built; three or four eggs are laid in a

small depression or scrape. Peregrines are a monogamous, with both the male and female tending the young. Mated pairs may stay together year round in Marin. The male feeds the female during prelaying and incubation, and after hatching, he feeds the brood and his mate until the female begins to hunt progressively more.

There was a sudden population decline of Peregrines in the late 1940s, which was clearly linked to pesticides and PCB poisoning causing eggshell thinning. This exterminated the Peregrines in the eastern United States and southeastern Canada, as well as severely impacting numbers elsewhere. The use of these harmful pesticides was greatly restricted in the United States in 1972, and the populations have expanded through natural recovery and management activities. There has actually been a rapid increase in numbers since 1980s.

Watch overhead for these rapid, agile, spectacular falcons from the lighthouse observation deck. They are truly beautiful to see!

Sources:

The Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas, A Project of Point Reyes Bird Observatory, by W. David Shuford, published by Bushtit Books, 1993.

Raptors of California, by Hans Peeters and Pam Peeters, published by University of California Press, 2005.

The Birder's Handbook, by Paul R. Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, published by Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988.

National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America, published by National Geographic Society, 1983.