



Peregrine in flight over Napa Valley. Photo by Howard Hunt.

Flight of the Santa Cruz falcon

By Sam Mitchell



Immature peregrine falcon. Photo by Brian Walton.

As co-ordinator of the West Coast's largest peregrine falcon breeding program, Brian Walton has found himself in some rather strange and dangerous places while following California's endangered falcons. But the strangest of them all was not some wind-swept peak in the High Sierras, where most people think falcons hang out—it was on a narrow ledge of a downtown Los Angeles bank building 38 stories above a busy city street.

Walton found himself on the ledge two times: once to “rob” the city-slicking falcons' nest of its precious eggs (which were incubated

artificially), and later to fill the nest with two down-covered peregrine chicks. Much to the modest Walton's chagrin, reporters flocked to the scene like vultures flocking to a cow carcass, and Walton soon found himself somewhat of a local hero in southern California as the “bird man” who has returned the rare falcons back to L.A.'s smoggy skies.

Munching on a ham sandwich at his desk at the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group's home base, Walton unconvincingly assured *OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA* that he was just another “bureaucrat,” and he was quite content to go about his



Peregrine on nesting ledge at Big Sur. Photo by Kurt Stolzenburg.



Climber retrieves eggs from wild peregrine falcon nest. Photo by Rob Ramey.



One-day-old peregrine chick dozes near unhatched egg at Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group facility. Photo by Brian Walton.



Foster parent tends to peregrine chicks. Photo by Brian Walton.

business at the falcon breeding facility.

"All my friends are out on those wind-swept peaks," said the sedentary Walton with delicious deadpan aplomb.

Don't let Walton's unassuming demeanor fool you for a minute. He and his dedicated crew at SCPBRG are no strangers to round-the-clock hard work and low pay as they battle almost impossible odds (the least of which is financial) to re-establish the magnificent peregrine falcon to its former range in California. Indeed, until the 10-year-old facility (at the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California) received power in 1983, the actual egg incubation and chick rearing took place in Walton's living room.

Fortunately, all that hard work has not been in vain. So far, the center—which is one of three falcon breeding centers operated by the Peregrine Fund—has released 244 baby peregrines into the wild. More importantly, captive-bred falcons are beginning to raise families of their own, from the "wilds" of downtown Los Angeles to the rocky face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. ("That's about as wind-swept as you can get," noted Walton.)

Much has been written about SCPBRG's unique falcon management program, including articles in *Life*, *Audubon*, and, of course, *OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA*. Surprisingly little has been written about the Santa Cruz center itself. Patricia Zenone, a researcher at the center, helped fill in some of these falcon management knowledge gaps as she led *OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA* on a fascinating tour of the grounds, where a person can see more peregrine falcons in one place than probably anywhere else on earth. (For information on tours, you can call [408] 429-2466.)

The first thing that strikes you about the breeding facility is its appearance. Nestled in the bottom of a long-abandoned quarry at the end of a winding dirt road that seems to head into the middle of nowhere, the haphazard conglomeration of redwood-stained plywood outbuildings reminds one more of a Nevada silver boomtown gone belly-up than a scientific research institute. But appearances can be deceiving, as we found out on our tour.

Researchers monitor health of peregrine chicks with laboratory tests. Photo by James Fangmeier.



The "tour" itself is actually limited to a few peeks at the beautiful falcons in their flight pens inside the plywood compound. As interesting as the birds are, the *real* tour is the story that tour guide Zenone shares with her audience. Here is SCPBRG's story in a nutshell.

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The work year for the center's employees cranks up in January, about the same time the 13 breeding pairs start getting romantic. If all goes well, these 13 pairs of "wild" birds (most of which were donated by falconers) will have no problem consummating their vows and producing a fertile clutch of eggs by spring.

It's not quite so simple for the seven single female "foster mothers"—most of which are prairie falcons (a similar, but more common species of falcon than the peregrine). These birds, which have been "imprinted" to humans, much as a baby duck may imprint itself to the family dog, have to be "courted" by humans to induce them to lay (infertile) eggs and prepare themselves for motherhood duties down the road.

"We try to figure out [the males'] mating call, and we practice," said Zenone, who has perfected the "ee-CHUP!" mating call. "They start to court us as soon as we walk in the door."

The courtship ritual also involves an elaborate "dance" and even sharing of food (dead chickens and domestic quail). It's all in a day's work.

Even more fascinating (some might say more absurd) than courting the female birds is courting the center's human-imprinted male bird, Juan Carlos, their voluntary semen donor. If, for whatever reason, one of the breeding pairs fails to copulate, researchers "will call on our voluntary semen donor and inseminate the female artificially."

When Zenone calls Juan Carlos a "voluntary" semen donor, she doesn't use the term loosely. The amorous Juan—who literally thinks he's a person—actually copulates on a special semen-collection hat worn by his human "mate."

"[Juan Carlos] didn't really like the hat at first," recalled Zenone. "He would rather just do it on people's heads. It amazes me how much we can ask these birds to do." (Zenone, who complained that *Life* magazine



Brian Walton fits bird band on leg of peregrine chick being returned to wild nest. Photo by Frans Lanting.

Peregrine falcon guarding eggs in Sonoma County. Photo by Kurt Stolzenburg.



blew the hat story out of proportion, asked us to not harp on it, so we'll stop here . . .)

About the time the center's breeding pairs start laying eggs in March and April, wild eggs from all over the state start arriving in Santa Cruz on the way to the incubators at the facility. Due to problems caused by DDT—which is *still* a major threat to California's peregrine population—eggshells are so thin that the parent birds often break them. Therefore, eggs from birds in the wild, and even those from the center, are incubated artificially. When the eggs are removed, egghunters leave a clutch of "dummy" eggs so the falcons won't abandon their reproductive cycle.

The eggs hatch in about a month. For the first few days, the tiny chicks are cared for by humans. As soon as the chicks start to open their eyes (which would allow them to imprint on their human mothers), they are handed over to their first foster mothers, the human-imprinted prairie falcons. These foster mothers,

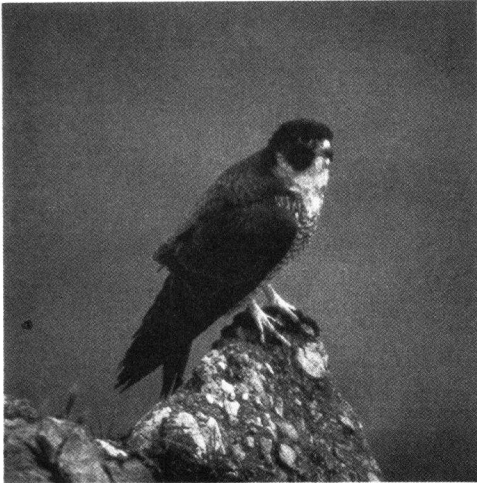
working as go-betweens between humans and wild birds, take care of their unnaturally large families for 10 days, after which time they're moved into the care of the captive birds.

Those babies that are going to be "fostered" back into the wild nests that were robbed six weeks earlier stay with the captive pairs for another week. Ironically, while they're being conditioned to the wild side of falcon life, the babies are constantly bombarded by a loud voice from a radio that masks the sounds of human activity to keep them wilder! (This radio plays 365 days a year for the "wild" birds, in fact.)

After a week, the babies (now three weeks old) are ready to take their second major journey—this time back to the original wild nests. While the wild birds are out foraging, climbers

remove the dummy eggs and replace them with a pair of healthy chicks. Imagine the parent birds' surprise at finding a half-grown family in a nest that contained just eggs half an hour earlier!

Back at the falcon ranch, those babies that are going to be "hacked" back into the wild live with the captive pairs until they are five weeks old. "Hacking" is a process, perfected by falconers over the centuries, whereby young falcons are trained for a life in the wild without the benefit of wild parents. At the tender age of five weeks, these babies are put in a "hacking box" and delivered to selected spots all over California—including one hacking site in Los Angeles "right above one of the busiest intersections in the world,"



Peregrine falcon in San Luis Obispo County.
Photo by Gary Guliasi.



"Hacking" box in Santa Barbara County serves as a transition "home" for birds being returned to the wild. Photo by Brian Walton.

according to Walton. After a week spent in the box, the three young birds are released to prepare for a life in the wild blue yonder.

Last year's release of 81 babies was the best of the center's 10-year history. Of the 81, 51 were fostered back into wild parents' nests and 30 were hacked. Walton is deservedly proud of his record, and he's especially excited about his success stories in Los Angeles, which disproves that peregrine falcons need huge areas of privacy to survive.

"Falcons are creatures of the sky," said Walton. "That's why they can live in cities (where they feed on pigeons and starlings). A building 350 feet off the ground is probably the safest place you can imagine. That pair [in Los Angeles] didn't need to

defend its nest the entire year except the two times I was down there."

As happy as Walton and Zenone are, they both realize their work is far from over. As long as DDT manages to rear its ugly head by whatever means, the peregrine falcon is in danger. And even if the peregrine falcon were ever to fully recover its former numbers, there are species all over California, the nation, and the world that need a helping hand if they're going to make it.

"We now know very well how to breed peregrines in captivity," said Zenone. "We feel the time is right to begin breeding endangered raptors all over the world." 🐾

Sam Mitchell is a free-lance writer living in Scotts Valley.

The Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group operates under a memorandum of understanding with the California Department of Fish and Game and is under contract with the DFG to reintroduce peregrine falcons into the state. The group has also received some funding from the DFG.