

Falcon team's job well done

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — With every passing day, another species loses its last fingerhold and tumbles into the abyss of extinction. But the peregrine falcon, once all but lost, has managed to beat the odds for a remarkable recovery.

Beating the odds took a lot of help. The peregrine's return to the wild was made possible only by a 25-year effort by a group of determined biologists. The effort has been so successful that the Predatory Bird Research Group at UC Santa Cruz is planning to close down its falcon-breeding program by 1992.

"I'm really excited, it's great to finish a project like this successfully," said biologist Brian Walton, coordinator of the PBRG since 1977. "Our goal was to breed 500

birds and establish 125 breeding pair in the wild. So far we've bred 750 birds and the wild population in California is up to about 120 pair.

"It's time to wind down the breeding program and concentrate on monitoring them in the wild," he said.

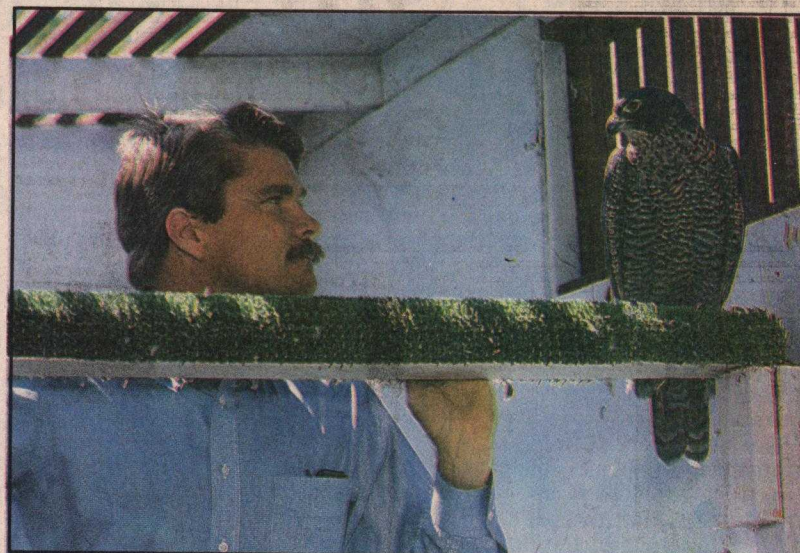
The program's motley array of portable offices and falcon chambers is approaching the end of its usable lifespan, and the UCSC campus is becoming too crowded for the health of the sensitive birds, Walton said.

"The original plan for the campus saw this area as a football stadium," Walton said. "We've always known this was supposed to be temporary." The stadium scenario is now unlikely, but noise generated by recent growth at the campus has been intrusive.

"If the birds are disturbed, they won't breed," Walton said. "The development here on campus has been nice, but significant, and the potential for disturbance is great. Last year, for the first time, we lost production due to noise and disturbance."

Student use of nearby hiking trails is up, and weeks of helicopter noise after the Oct. 17 earthquake was a severe problem. A distraught student once stood on the cliffs above the breeding chambers threatening to kill himself, and the light, noise of police sirens and loudspeakers terrified the birds. In addition, the downing of area power poles earlier this year cut off the center's incubators, chilling this year's batch of eggs.

Half of the breeding chambers have been taken down already, and Walton foresees removing the rest



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Program coordinator Brian Walton with peregrine falcon.

by 1995.

While the Santa Cruz group has focused on returning peregrines to

California and Nevada, the Peregrine Fund, headquartered at the
Please see FALCON — A14

Falcon

Continued from Page A1

World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, has been breeding and releasing peregrines in the eastern U.S. The Peregrine Fund's East Coast release program was recently deemed a success, and many of its researchers have begun a program to save the rare aplomado falcon.

In 1970, only two breeding pair of the once-cosmopolitan peregrines remained in California — one in Sonoma County and another on Morro Rock in Southern California. The birds had vanished completely east of the Mississippi and from most of their former habitat in the U.S.

The rapid decline of peregrine populations worldwide was linked to the pesticide DDT, which becomes concentrated during its journey up the food chain and settles in the tissue of predators, causing the falcon eggs to become thin and shatter under the weight of the adult bird.

Faced with the falcon's ultimate demise, raptor biologists began snatching the fragile peregrine eggs and hatching them in incubators. The resulting chicks were raised by captive birds and released, or spirited back into wild nests to be raised by compliant wild birds.

Egg collecting, care of captive birds, breeding research and release of the young birds became a consuming passion for a select group of biologists.

"This work takes people on a mission," Walton said. "You get more than normal satisfaction from it, but it takes above-normal effort. None of this was ever done before," he said. "Only about 50 peregrines had ever been bred in captivity before, and since that time about 3,000 have been bred."

Despite the success of captive breeding programs, biologists say the peregrine is not out of the woods yet.

Habitat is vanishing faster than ever, and DDT is a lingering problem, even though the pesticide has been banned in the U.S. for over a decade. For reasons not yet fully understood, wild falcons in Central California are still accumulating unusually high levels of pesticide contamination.

While 120 pairs of birds doesn't seem like many for a state the size of California, predators like the peregrine have never been numerous. At their peak, biologists estimate there were probably no more than 300 pair in the state. But the cliff-dwelling peregrine has partially adapted to habitat loss by adapting to the sheer downtown canyons of modern cities, and successful pairs are now nesting on buildings in Los Angeles, San Diego and the Bay Area.

About 2,000 visitors a year take guided tours of the UCSC facility, but people interested in seeing the falcons should reserve a tour now. For reservations, call Patricia Zenone at 459-2466.