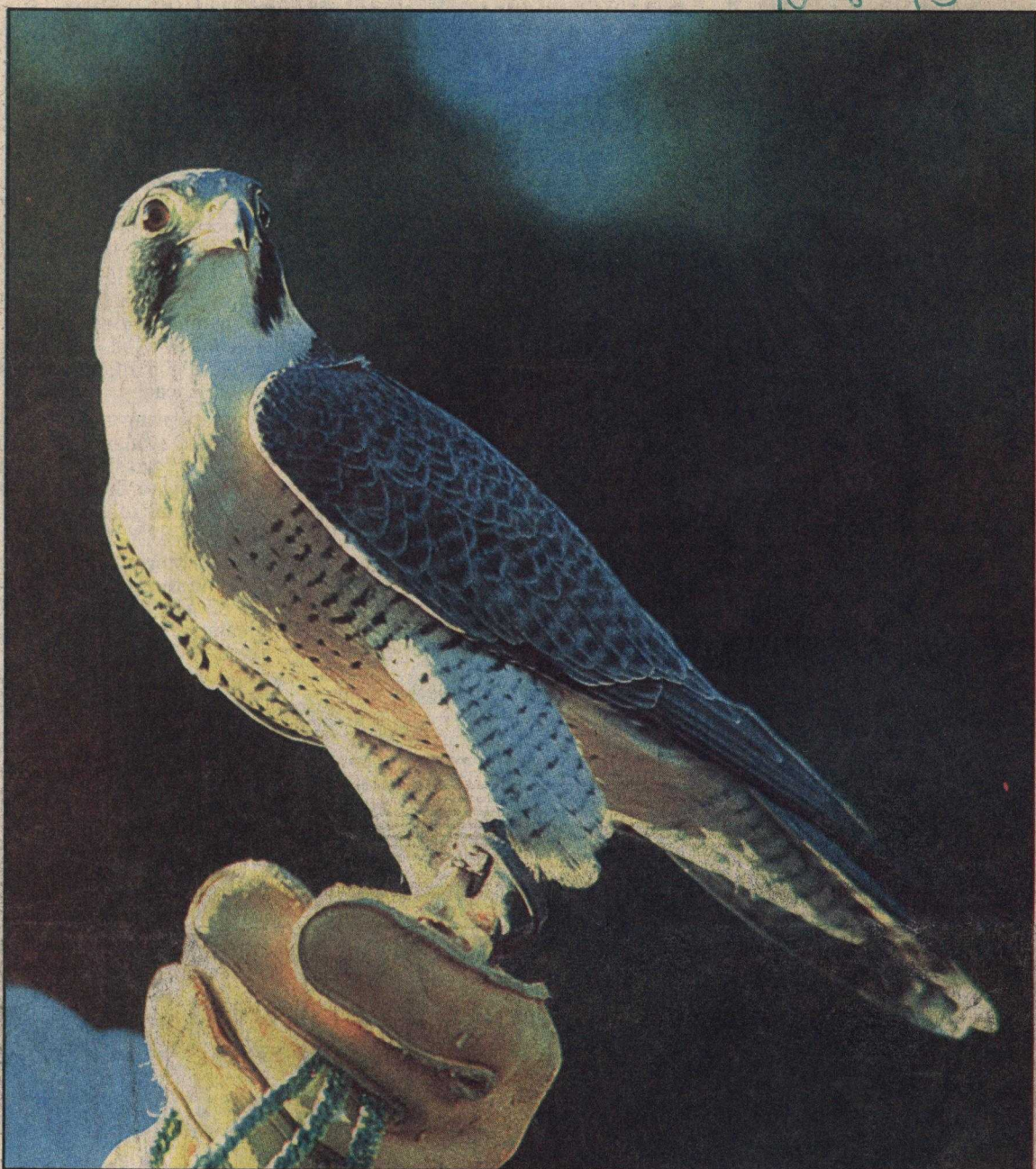


Birds
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— Mollie Beattie, Fish and Wildlife Director —

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Peregrine falcons, this one at UCSC, may be taken off the endangered species list.

Peregrine falcon back from near-extinction

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The peregrine falcon, one of the world's fastest birds with spectacular aerial agility, has made the flight back from near extinction, a success story largely incubated in Santa Cruz.

The bird — once thought to be doomed from its exposure to the pesticide DDT — has rebounded so strongly that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to remove the Arctic peregrine falcon, its northern subspecies, from the endangered species list.

The pending proposal applies only to falcons nesting in Alaska, Canada and Greenland, which represent about 75 percent of the total population.

Within the next two years, peregrines in the rest of the United States are also expected to be removed from the endangered species list.

"Here is real evidence that the Endangered Species Act does what it was intended to do — bring back species from the brink of extinction," Fish and Wildlife Director Mollie Beattie said in a statement.

It's rare when a species is taken off the endangered list. Of 17 species removed from the list of 412 endangered, seven had become extinct and six were found to be not as threatened as original data showed. Only four recovered from threatened status.

The peregrine falcon's turnaround is due largely to the ban on DDT and efforts by state, federal and private biologists to re-introduce them to their nesting areas.

The Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group has figured prominently in the rebuilding of the peregrine population. It is the only peregrine restoration program on the West Coast.

Since 1970, when only two pairs of the falcons could be located in California, almost 800 peregrines have been raised at the program's facility on the UC Santa Cruz campus, and released to the wild, according to Bill Walton, the program coordinator.

At least two of the falcons, after their release in Yosemite and Big Sur, have returned to take up

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Falcons return

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residence in Santa Cruz County, one along Waddell Creek on the North Coast and one in a grove of eucalyptus trees at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River, he said.

With its captive breeding and release work complete, the program now is focused on monitoring the peregrine population to see whether their numbers continue to grow.

Sometime after December, the researchers will give up their secluded quarters below a bluff on the campus and move to UCSC Long Marine Lab in Santa Cruz.

Like the peregrine falcon fighting the odds to survive as a species, the predatory bird program at first seemed destined for failure.

"What we tried 15 years ago, most people thought was impossible," said Walton. "They said it was impossible to keep them in captivity, impossible to breed them in captivity, impossible to raise young to release to the wild and impossible for the young to survive in the wild. It's been very rewarding for us to persevere through all the criticism."

The peregrine falcon is prized by falconers for its dazzling speed, grace and spectacular aerial dives of up to 200 miles an hour. With a wingspan of 40 inches, the 15-inch, dark-headed peregrine is the second largest falcon in the United States.

The peregrines forage in the air — over trees, water, parking lots, mountains marshes and housing developments — capturing smaller birds as their prey.

In the early '70s, scientists believed only 2,000 of them existed, their reproductive capability impeded by the DDT consumed in the fat of smaller birds on which they fed. DDT caused their eggshells to thin and break before fledglings could hatch.

DDT application was restricted in the U.S. in

1972. But peregrines continued to suffer because the pesticide remains in sediments. Many species of peregrine fly to areas in Central and South America where DDT is still legal, said Walton.

When listed as endangered 23 years ago, the peregrines had vanished from the eastern U.S. and declined to one-fifth their historic numbers in the west and north.

Government biologists now believe the bird numbers between 5,000 and 10,000 adults.

"Clearly the bird has made a dramatic recovery throughout most of the United States," said Michael Bean, wildlife expert from the Environmental Defense Fund.

He said the bird is adapting in some cases to an artificial habitat that in some ways resembles its natural cliffside nesting areas, including nesting on Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, and on skyscrapers in Los Angeles, Boston and Baltimore.

With about 120 pairs in California, Walton said he expects the restored falcon population to continue to increase, at least over the short term. Researchers will continue to monitor the birds for effects of pesticide.

When the bird facility moves off campus, the last of the Santa Cruz peregrines will be sent to Boise, Idaho, where their work as breeding stock will continue.

Vada, a surrogate mother who chirps "e-chup" and incubates and rears other birds' young, will leave the coop. Sweetie and Strawberry, having raised about 30 babies each, are already in Boise.

Far from being sad, Walton says this is what he hoped would happen.

"It's the end of an era, but that was the whole goal. We never had a goal of having birds in captivity for our benefit. We did it for their benefit," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.