

UCSC Predatory Bird Research Group Is Bringing Back Peregrine Falcon

By KEVIN WOODWARD
Sentinel Staff Writer

The Peregrine Falcon is a creature of particular interest to those who love and study birds.

The species is beautifully marked and its spectacular flight is a source of wonderment as the bird falls like a

thunderbolt, oftentimes snatching its prey in midair.

Unfortunately, because of the Peregrine's position at the head of a long food chain, it is especially vulnerable to man-made poisons in the environment, particularly DDT, and was placed on the endangered species list in 1968.

At that time the bird was

considered extinct east of the Rocky Mountains, with approximately a couple of dozen pairs surviving on the entire West Coast.

"It's up to about 25 pairs in California now. In a few years we hope there will be several hundred," said Brian Walton, coordinator of UCSC's Predatory Bird Research Group.

The group is one of only two in the United States (the other is located at Cornell University) that has developed a successful captive breeding program of the endangered bird on a large scale.

The program has been so successful that not one bird has been lost yet, and 20 have been raised and released into the wild by the UCSC facility.

"We have a real good record for hatching fertile eggs, raising the young and getting them out," said Walton, who previously directed his own biological consulting agency and began developing wild bird breeding techniques for the California Department of Fish and Game.

That track record is particularly significant when one considers the 75 percent first-year mortality rate experienced in the wild by the birds, which

have only a four-to-five-year life expectancy.

"We see the captive breeding program as a valuable tool with the Peregrine Falcon, and we see it as a useful method to be used with other predatory birds. At this time only the Peregrine is involved, but there are possibilities involved with the Harris Hawk and some persons anticipate involvement with the Bald Eagle and possibly the California Condor," said Dr. Jim Raush, a Santa Cruz veterinarian who founded the UCSC program, but had to step down in 1977 when it became too big for him to handle.

The predatory bird program, currently under the wing of Environmental Studies on campus, took its first big step in 1975 when an aviary was built in an abandoned UCSC rock quarry to house the birds involved in the revolutionary breeding program.

The aviary currently houses eight pairs of Peregrines, two pair of Prairie Falcons, a pair of Harris Hawks and another of Gyrfalcons. It is mainly comprised of spacious 15-25 foot high breeding chambers with nesting areas located high up the walls to simulate a cliff environment familiar to the

birds.

The main concern at the facility is quality environmental control — an attempt to protect the birds from natural and manmade threats posed by chemical poisons and disease. The birds are cared for by handlers John Schmitt and Merlyn Felton, who do everything from cleaning out the pens to feeding the mature birds.

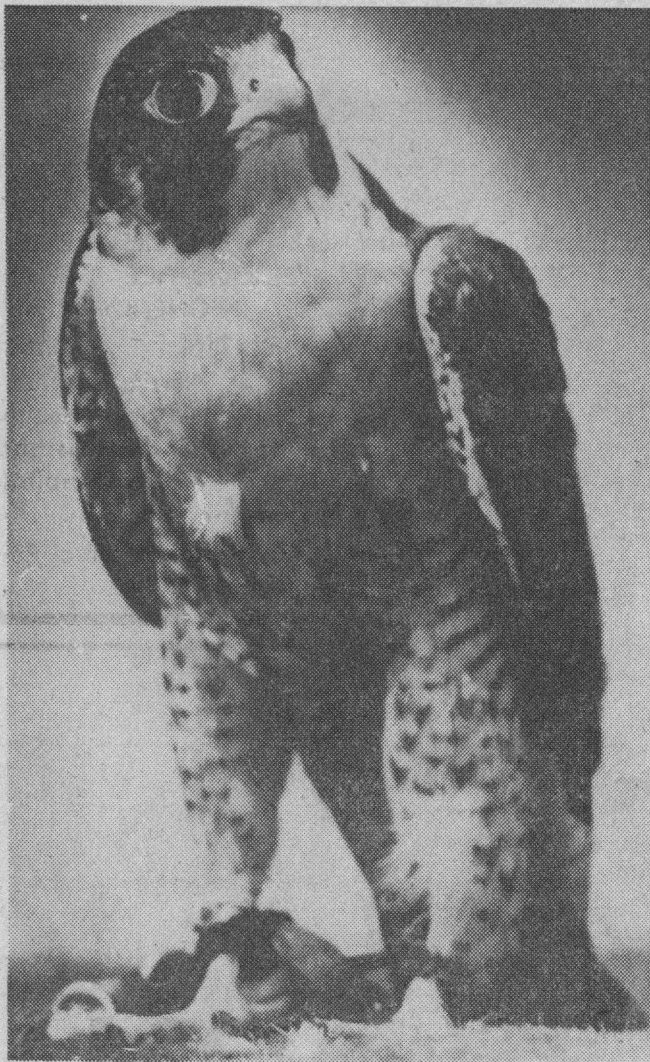
That's the easy part. The difficulties arise in mating the birds, which sometimes take two-to-three years to establish a pair bond. Not everyone is capable of handling birds of prey; they are never pets and are plain nasty most of the time. The birds are solitary creatures and must be handled with patience and subtlety, never commanded.

"The only birds that will breed are those that are taken young and raised in captivity. Wild birds will not breed in captivity," Schmitt explained.

Once the eggs are laid, they are either hatched in an incubator or by the birds who laid them. The captive birds lay their eggs in March and April and hatch them in May and June. Ten days after the birds are hatched, those that are to



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Peregrine Falcon at UCSC facility.

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be released are placed in wild nests throughout the state. A few are kept to be raised in captivity and used for future breeding purposes.

Fortunately, most wild hawks and falcons are not choosy about who turns up in their nests and raise the birds as their own. The progress of the fledglings that are placed in the wild are closely monitored by Walton and his aides to make sure that major problems do not arise. This kind of manipulation is necessary for creatures facing extinction.

"Keeping track of these birds once we release them is extremely difficult. The nesting sites are hard to get to by foot," Schmitt said, "but if the nests are breeding well, we don't give them as much time and effort as the ones that are having problems."

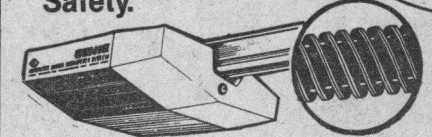
The whole process itself is so new that the possibilities involved are limitless and similar programs could very well be initiated to help turn the tide of extinction for other rare birds.

"This is hardcore wildlife management, not just lip service," Raush said. "This is really important work. It's getting down in the dirt and making it happen."

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