

STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



©WINTER 2007 FALCON PEREGRINATIONS

-- Mark Spreyer

Just a short walk from your car, should you come for a Sunday visit, sits a peregrine falcon. It perches in a cage overlooking our lake. Even behind the screen, it takes command of the situation.

Unfortunately, this bird was found (illegally) shot in Lincolnwood and is permanently injured. Twenty years ago, though, there weren't any resident peregrines to either admire or shoot at. At that time, the peregrine was still a federally endangered species.

This species' recovery is one I take personal pride in since I organized and directed Chicago's peregrine falcon release program during the 1980s. In Illinois, the spring of 1988 was an eventful time for these rare birds.

That year, I celebrated Mother's Day watching a peregrine falcon mother feeding her two chicks atop a Chicago office building. These were the first two peregrines hatched anywhere in Illinois in 37 years, so in the bird world it was an auspicious Mother's Day indeed.

Decline Due to DDT

Peregrines were absent for nearly four decades thanks to DDT, a long-lasting insecticide that profoundly affects the reproductive metabolism of many bird species, notably birds of prey. In the case of the peregrine, the pesticide interferes with calcium absorption, resulting in egg shells so thin that they broke under the weight of the incubating parent.

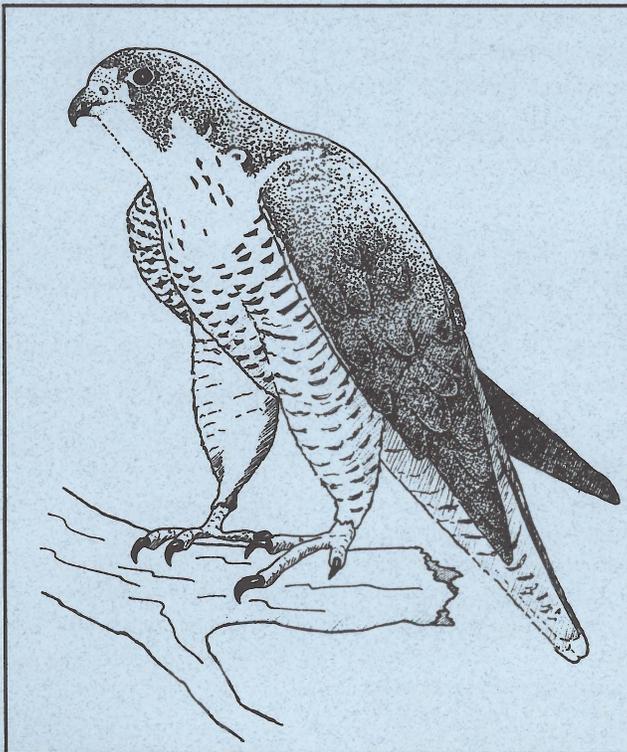
By 1970, only 39 breeding pairs could be found in the continental United States-- all west of the Mississippi. In 1971, DDT was banned from use in this country but, because of DDT's low solubility in water and its slow rate of chemical breakdown, the effects of the ban were not immediately realized.

At about the same time DDT was banned, the peregrine became a charter member of the federal government's newly established list of endangered species. The equally new Peregrine Fund, meanwhile, was successfully breeding peregrines in captivity. By 1975, the Peregrine Fund began releasing falcons at various sites including East Coast cities.

Cities may strike one as odd places to release endangered birds, but peregrines see nothing odd about taking up residence on structures built and occupied by humans. In an 1877 magazine article, George Boudin described a peregrine encounter:

On the 13th of September, 1868, I shot a fine specimen (male) at the corner of Fifth and Girard Avenue, Philadelphia. For nearly three weeks this bird of prey had made its home in St. Peter's steeple.

Other remarkable examples of urban falcons were to be seen in the 1940s and '50s on New York's St. Regis Hotel and, most dramatically, on Montreal's Sun Life Assurance building where, over a



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period of 16 years, a female peregrine and three successive males raised a total of 21 young.

Sweet Home, Chicago

In 1986, atop another man-made structure—University Hall on the University of Illinois Chicago campus—a falcon release program was initiated by combining the talents of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, Illinois Department of Conservation, Lincoln Park Zoo, and the Chicago Audubon Society. It was my privilege to head this cooperative effort.

A male peregrine from the 1986 release was the father of the two chicks I was watching on Mother's Day. The mother was released from Minneapolis in 1985. Such long-distance relationships are not unusual for these falcons hence the name peregrine, as in "peregrination."

In 1987, we released falcons from the water tower at Fort Sheridan. By 1988, a male from the tower mated with a female released from Rochester, Minnesota. Where was their nest? On a building in Milwaukee. See what I mean about peregrination?

No Longer Endangered

As mentioned earlier, peregrines were being released at a variety of locations and, in 1980, the first successful breeding of released falcons occurred in New Jersey. Between 1985 and 1988, pairs of peregrines could be found in, at least, 24 cities and towns. Of these, 21 pairs raised about 45 fledglings. Interestingly, nine of these urban locations had never hosted a peregrine release.

Studies done on the New Jersey falcon eggs found DDT present in high levels showing that birds continue to be exposed to contaminants.

By 1993, more than 100 peregrine nests were found east of the Mississippi River and in 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the Peregrine Falcon from the Endangered Species List. Approximately, 1,600 pairs were breeding across the U.S. and Canada.

Personally Speaking

Over the years, I have seen peregrine nests everywhere from a cliff in South Africa to Minnesota's rocky Lake Superior shoreline. While these locations are more picturesque than downtown Chicago, no peregrine sighting will hold as much meaning or joy for me than watching the newly hatched chicks at the corner of Adams and Wacker.

Renewal Reminder

If you see a 6 after your name, this will be your last newsletter until you renew. If you didn't receive our annual membership letter, just use the form on the back of this newsletter. Please remember, in order to keep Stillman a viable and diverse natural area, we need your support. Thank you.

PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@flash.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

NEW YEAR'S DAY WALK

Join the members of the Prairie-Woods Audubon Society (the local chapter of the National Audubon Society) for their annual New Year's Day walk along Stillman's trails. Over the years, we've seen everything from bluebirds and shrikes to the remains of multiple coyote kills. If you like winter, don't like football, or need to sober up; this is the walk for you.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 1
Time: 10:00AM
Age: 10 years and up

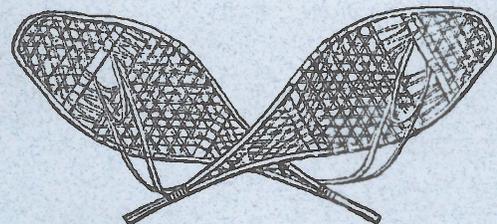
MAKING TRACKS

Join Susan Allman as she shows you how to recognize the different types of tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow on the 21st, we'll try again on Jan. 28th. Snowshoes are also an option on these days.

Remember to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sundays Jan. 21 & 28
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available during the week, by reservation, to school classes. For a brochure that describes the programs and fees, just call or check our website at: www.stillmanncc.org.



SNOWSHOE SUNDAYS

Fresh snow can add a peaceful hush to the landscape and a surface that glitters in the bright winter sun. In order to help you sample the winter scenery in a novel way, we have 20 pairs of snowshoes. So, bring your own snowshoes or use ours and join us on a winter walk. **Please, don't forget to call (847)428-OWLS to make reservations.** If there isn't a thick layer of snow, the activity will be cancelled. Of course, if you have your own equipment, cross-country skiers and snowshoers are welcome on any snow-covered Sunday.

Date: Sundays: Jan. 14, Feb. 4 & 11

Time: 2:00PM

Fee: None

OWL MOON WALK

In honor of the full moon, Mark Spreyer will present an indoor presentation on owls. Afterwards, with the help of the moon, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's Great Horned Owls.



Space is limited so call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations. (Groundhogs best stay in their burrows!)

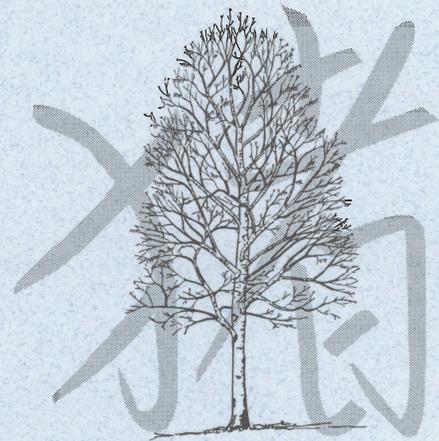
Date: Friday, Feb. 2

Time: 6:30PM

Age: 10 years and up

Member's Fee: Free

Non-member's Fee: \$2.00



WELCOME THE YEAR OF THE PIG* WITH A WALK IN THE WOODS

Don't stay inside and pig out on this Chinese New Year's Day. Instead, learn how to identify cherry, maple, ash and other midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will help you boar into tree I.D. Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions. After our walk, you'll know which tree, common in our area, came from China.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 18

Time: 2:00PM

Age: 10 years and up

Fee: None

*In case you're wondering, the second New Moon after the winter solstice begins the Chinese New Year. It is based strictly on astronomical observations and has nothing to do with the Pope, emperors, animals or myths. Due to its scientific and mathematical nature, it can be easily and precisely calculated backward or forward for thousands of years.

FACTS ABOUT PEREGRINE FALCONS

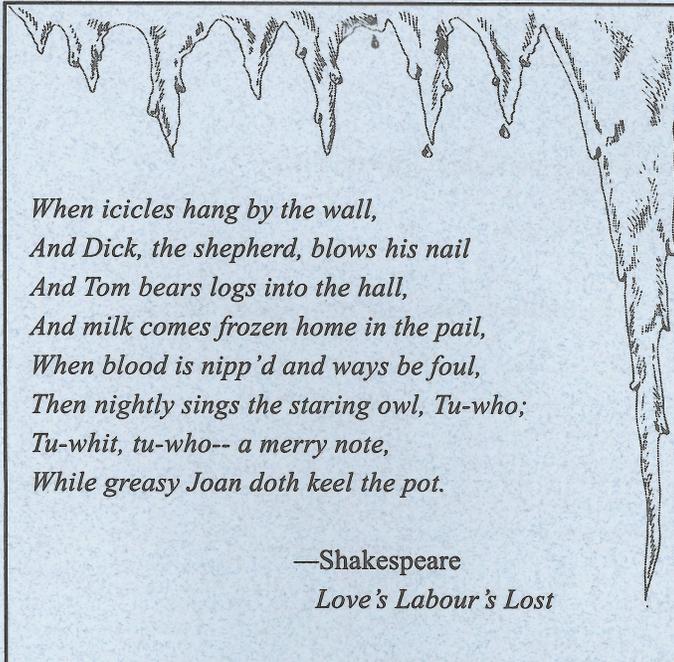
Identifying Marks: Wingspan 3.5 feet; length 15-21 inches. Has slate-blue back and wings, and a dark barred tail. A dark moustache-like stripe runs down the side of the face. Feathers on the belly are lighter in color.

Habitat: Cliff-dwelling birds that can be found worldwide in regions as diverse as desert canyons, temperate zones, and the arctic tundra.

Nest: Scrapes out a nest on cliff ledges, usually overlooking a river, lake, or coastline. Will use the ledges of tall city buildings.

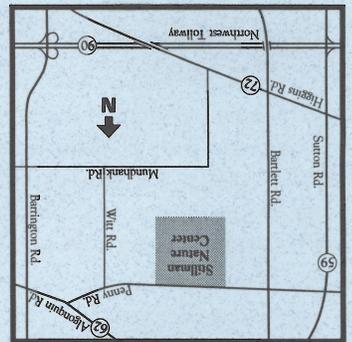
Diet: Feeds almost exclusively on live birds. (During the fall migration, our resident peregrine watched every warbler and thrush with a predator's dedicated intensity.)

Voice: Alarm call a slow, rising, raucous *cack, cack, cack, cack, cack*.



*When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick, the shepherd, blows his nail
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in the pail,
When blood is nipp'd and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl, Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who-- a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.*

—Shakespeare
Love's Labour's Lost



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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.
I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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