

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

Powerful and fast-flying, the Peregrine Falcon hunts medium-sized birds, dropping down on them from high above in a spectacular stoop. They were virtually eradicated from eastern North America by pesticide poisoning in the middle 20th century. After significant recovery efforts, Peregrine Falcons have made an incredible rebound and are now regularly seen in many large cities and coastal areas.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Peregrine Falcons are the largest falcon over most of the continent, with long, pointed wings and a long tail. Be sure to look at shape as well as size—long primary feathers give the Peregrine a long-winged shape. As with most raptors, males are smaller than females, so Peregrines can overlap with large female Merlins or small male Gyrfalcons.

Color Pattern

Adults are blue-gray above with barred underparts and a dark head with thick sideburns. Juveniles are heavily marked, with vertical streaks instead of horizontal bars on the breast. Despite considerable age-related and geographic variation, an overall steely, barred look remains.

Behavior

Peregrine Falcons catch medium-sized birds in the air with swift, spectacular dives, called stoops. In cities they are masterful at catching pigeons. Elsewhere they feed especially on shorebirds and ducks. They often sit on high perches, waiting for the right opportunity to make their aerial assault.

Habitat

Look for Peregrine Falcons perching or nesting on skyscrapers, water towers, cliffs, power pylons, and other tall structures. If a mudflat full of shorebirds and ducks suddenly erupts from the ground, scan the skies. A Peregrine (or Merlin) is probably in the area. Peregrines can be seen all over North America, but they are more common along coasts.

Cool Facts

- The name “peregrine” means wanderer, and the Peregrine Falcon has



one of the longest migrations of any North American bird. Tundra-nesting falcons winter in South America, and may move 25,000 km (15,500 mi) in a year.

- The Peregrine Falcon is a very fast flier, averaging 40-55 km/h (25-34 mph) in traveling flight, and reaching speeds up to 112 km/h (69 mph) in direct pursuit of prey. During its spectacular hunting stoop from heights of over 1 km (0.62 mi), the peregrine may reach speeds of 320 km/h (200 mph) as it drops toward its prey.