

The Status of the Chicago Peregrine Release and Restoration Project

by Mary Hennen

When the plight of the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) drew international attention, populations had already reached record lows. By the 1960s, peregrines were extirpated east of the Mississippi River and numbers in the western United States were reduced to an estimated 80 to 90 percent of previous levels. Until recovery efforts began in the mid-1980s, the last Illinois peregrine nesting occurred in Union County in 1951, over 40 years ago.

These declines, and the declines worldwide, were primarily the result of reproductive failures due to the ingestion of prey contaminated with

DDT, Dieldrin, and related pesticides. In the early 1970s, The Peregrine Fund was established to further the study, preservation, and captive propagation of Peregrine Falcons and other birds of prey. Through reintroduction efforts, regulatory control on the use of DDT and resultant reduction of levels of this chemical in the environment, peregrine populations are slowly recovering.

An adult female Peregrine Falcon displays her band which helps scientists keep track of her whereabouts. Photo by Mary Hennen.



An immature male Peregrine Falcon, which fledged in spring 1992, peers up at an adult female. Named Harriet, this female has remained on territory at 125 S. Wacker, downtown Chicago, for six years. Photo by Mary Hennen.

'As a result of the CPRR and other midwest releases, peregrines have established territories within the Chicagoland area; the first in 1986. By 1992, six Peregrine Falcon territories were established in northern Illinois and northwestern Indiana.'

Historically, peregrines resided in southeastern, southwestern, and west central portions of Illinois along the Mississippi and Wabash Rivers. Naturally cliff-dwelling birds, they adapt readily to city buildings. The city of Chicago mimics the preferred habitat of the peregrine and also provides several advantages. The skyscrapers are pseudo-cliffs along a waterway (Lake Michigan) that funnels numerous prey species through the area during spring and fall migrations. Chicago provides an ample supply of winter food in the number of pigeons (*Columba livia*) and starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in residence. Free of natural predators such as the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), the largest threat to the city-dwelling peregrines comes from other adult peregrines attempting to establish territories.