

PEREGRINE FALCONS NESTING ON LONG ISLAND

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Abstract—In 2004 Peregrine Falcons nested and fledged two young from an Osprey platform in salt marsh habitat at the Oceanside Marine Nature Study Area, Nassau County, Long Island, New York. The female of this pair was observed to be outfitted with a GPS receiver/transmitter and leg bands. Photographic analysis of the band number led to the identity and provenance of this individual (a reintroduction effort in Virginia), and these inquiries yielded additional insights regarding the origins of Peregrine Falcons appearing on Long Island, e.g., a second bird with attached transmitter derived from a reintroduction program in Pennsylvania. These records are noteworthy because the south shore of Long Island is an outwash plain and historically lacked topographic features appropriate for nesting Peregrines. The present article presents information concerning the Oceanside nest and three additional breeding sites on the Long Island coastal plain, all on tall, man-made structures.

The extirpation or severe population crises suffered by eastern North American raptors such as Peregrine Falcons, Ospreys, Bald Eagles, Cooper's Hawks, and Red-shouldered Hawks as a consequence of pesticides, and the subsequent reintroduction and/or resurgence of these species constitute a dramatic and generally positive story of wildlife conservation that has been amply documented elsewhere (e.g., Canadian Peregrine Foundation 2005a). In the New York City area, the Peregrine reintroduction program has been unusually successful. Tall buildings and high bridges emulate the cliff substrates that Peregrine Falcons have used for millennium to nest and raise young. There are now more than a dozen active nest sites within the city (New York City Department of Environmental Protection 2005). Depending on one's point of view, this introduction program might just have become a tad too successful. Resourceful, skilled biologists have gone beyond the original vision and Peregrine Falcons now routinely breed in areas where they were absent historically. At the same time, the Peregrines have taken advantage of the situation by adapting to man-made structures that mirror traditional nesting sites—and even, as reported here, by moving into new and uncharacteristic settings (mid to low platforms in marshes).

The impetus for this story began with the discovery of a Peregrine nest atop an Osprey platform on a bay island off Oceanside, Nassau County, Long Island,

New York. The South Shore of Long Island is an outwash plain from the terminal moraine of the last ice age and hardly a place one would equate with lofty cliffs and soaring vistas. Average height above sea level is at best two feet at the bottom of the 20-foot pole holding the platform. The nest appeared to us, when it was found, to be an unprecedented breeding context for this species. We could not find reference to anything remotely like this.

Furthermore, the female of this pair was no ordinary bird. It had been fitted with a “backpack and antenna” (Fig. 1). In addition to the normal aluminum wildlife band on its right leg, the bird was color-banded on the left leg (black over red, showing the numerals 8 and 5, respectively; see Fig. 2). It seemed likely that this bird’s provenance differed from that of the many Peregrines that pass through Long Island each fall—had it strayed from a research project, or was it an escaped falconer’s pet?

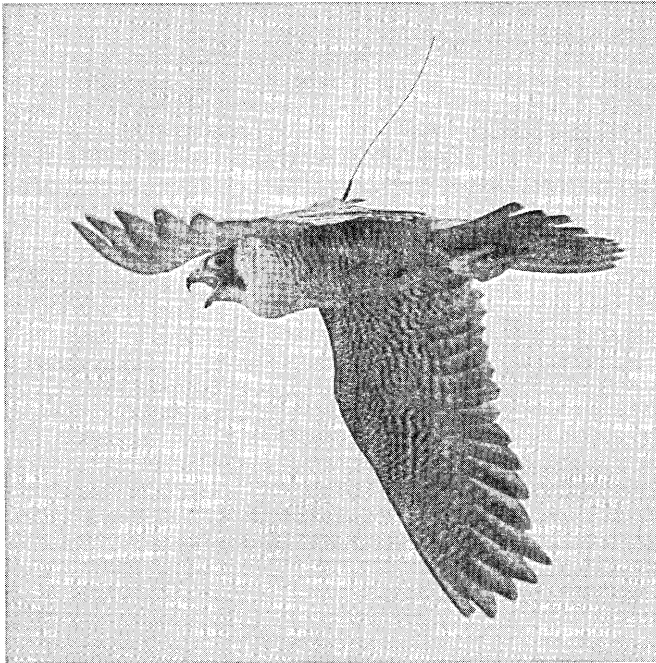


Figure 1.
Zoe, a female Peregrine Falcon
nesting near
Oceanside, Nassau Co., NY
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Figure 2.
Close-up of
Zoe's legs,
showing
color bands.
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With the band designations and the number, Mike started an internet search for a lost Peregrine Falcon. It soon became obvious that this bird was part of a satellite tracking study. But, from where and when? Peregrine Falcons have been observed carrying “backpacks” for a number of years on Long Island. No one here, as far as we know, had seriously addressed their origins until now. Nor did we know when we started the quest if more than one bird was involved.

The Peregrine Fund, in Boise, Idaho, widely recognized as leaders in the North American peregrine recovery efforts, has studied hundreds of peregrines via satellite over the years in central and western North America. The techniques used and their benign effects on the birds have been well established (Canadian Peregrine Foundation 2005b). These studies were in conjunction with the hacking of falcons throughout the West, in an effort to assess the results of the project and where the fledglings went.

In the East, The Canadian Peregrine Foundation (2005a, 2005b), responsible for reintroducing falcons into Canada, established “Project Track-em” in 2001 to answer questions about their own efforts, to wit: “In Ontario, many of the territorial adults no longer migrate in the winter. Yet, each fall, the young of the year disappear from their home ranges, presumably to head south. Unfortunately, few of these young peregrines are ever reported again.” Thus, they became involved in their own ongoing satellite-tracking program.

These techniques and the increasing sophistication of new equipment had positive effects in other venues. The State of Virginia established “FalconTrak 2001” to monitor hacked birds (Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries 2005). The Pennsylvania Game Commission (2005) joined shortly thereafter using solar-powered satellite transmitters obtained through The Canadian Peregrine Foundation. Long Island is literally surrounded to the north, west, and south by released birds being tracked by satellite.

Peregrines on Long Island

Peregrine Falcons can be found year-round on Long Island. As many as 150-200 migrants have been counted per season during the period September-November (Fire Island Raptor Enumerators 2005), and many birds seen in winter and summer are presumably wanderers from active breeding sites in and around New York City. The last Christmas Bird Count tallied a dozen birds on LI. Were they city birds wintering at the beach, fledglings from nearby reintroduction efforts, or winter residents from far northern populations? Determining the sub-specific identity of local Peregrines is often not feasible. The North American reintroduced stock was bred from a mixture of various North American and some European races (Canadian Peregrine Foundation 2005a), and their appearance often deviates from that of the familiar wild migrants of the race *tundrius*.

Our search of tracking records indicates that birds from Virginia and Pennsylvania spent considerable time along the east coast, not only from New Jersey south, but also on Long Island. The reasons for the Pennsylvania birds going to the coast are difficult to discern. A bird hacked from Harrisburg in 2002 wintered in the Delmarva Peninsula, traveled north to the New Jersey Shore, Long Island, New York City, Newburg, back to New Jersey, Delaware, New York, and finally Long Island again. In June 2004, when transmission ceased to show movement, a search was made and the transmitter, its bindings frayed, was found lodged on a piling in the marsh off the Wantagh Parkway. The Peregrine was gone and is presumably alive and well.

The Virginia birds have a different story. Breeding was established on platforms (towers) along the coast of Virginia. Newly hatched chicks from "wild" nesting pairs on coastal platforms were subsequently removed to a hacking site to the west in Shenandoah National Park. In the case of our local platform-breeding bird (with attached, but inoperable Virginia transmitter), the Virginia wildlife personnel speculate that they waited too long before removing the chick(s), which conceivably became imprinted on this marsh environment rather than the cliff where it was ultimately hacked. Many of their birds migrate to the east coastline. Thus, we have found that what we thought was a unique breeding situation had been firmly in place for a number of years elsewhere. Birds from this program have adapted to the new breeding environment (open marshes) in Virginia and now on Long Island.

Active Nests on Long Island

The first of these has been active for some years. The last three were all newly found this year (2004), some as a direct result of the ATLAS2000 program in New York.

1. Nassau University Medical Center in East Meadow.

This huge 26-story building is the largest structure in Nassau County, and the tallest on the island. On 6 June 1997, Long Island *Newsday* reported in an



Figure 3. Peregrine Falcon nest
on the water tower at Jones Beach
State Park, Nassau Co., NY.

almost full-page story, complete with photos and sketches, the first successful nesting for Nassau Co. The nest was located on a 17th floor ledge of the building. An attempt in the prior year (1996) produced eggs, but they failed to hatch.

2. Jones Beach Water Tower, at 200 feet on the barrier beach.

For a number of years, 1-2 peregrines have roosted on the tower in winter and spring raising speculation that they would soon nest. As spring progressed, they usually disappeared. This year a workman complained of dive-bombing birds when he went to do maintenance at the top of the tower. A nest, not visible from the ground, was discovered in the northeast corner containing two eggs (Fig. 3). The eggs failed to hatch and the nest was abandoned.

3. Osprey Platform on Parsonage Island, in Middle Bay, South of Oceanside.

A pair of peregrines has visited this site for several prior years and were promptly driven off by Ospreys who bred on the platform for the past decade. This year the Ospreys did not show and the peregrines established residency (Figs. 4, 5). One member of this pair, coming to the platform for the last four years, has an attached radio antenna on its back. This is the female Peregrine whose band number stimulated our inquiries, and the Marine Nature Study Area (2005) provides considerable information regarding this bird.

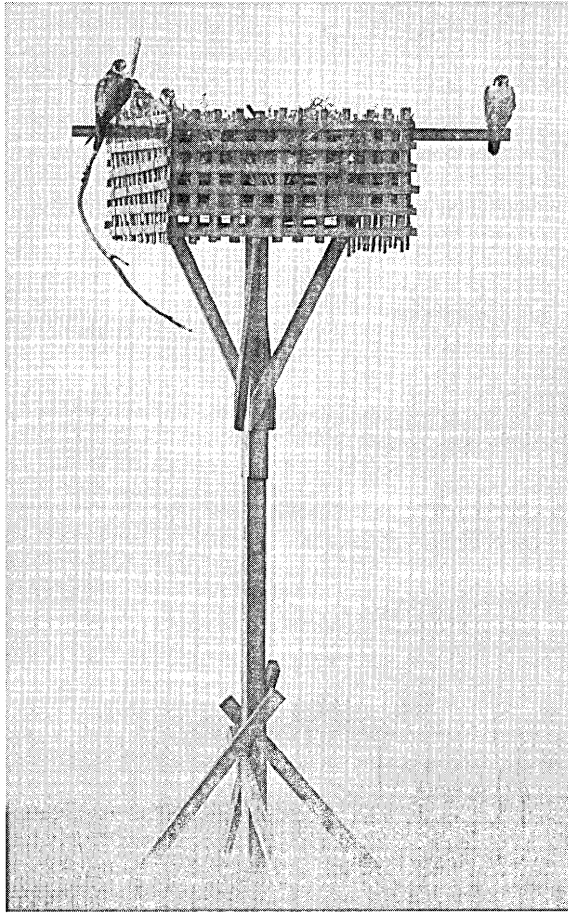


Figure 4.
Peregrine Falcon nest on
an Osprey platform near
Oceanside, Nassau Co., NY.
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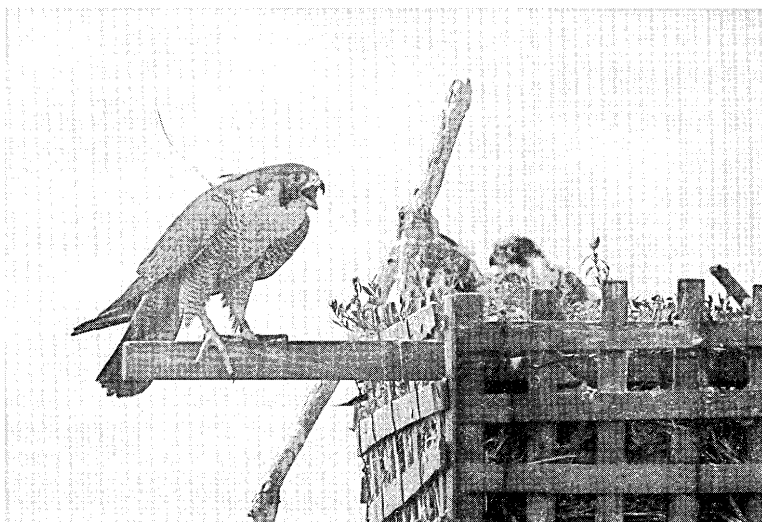


Figure 5.
Peregrine Falcon nest on an Osprey platform near
Oceanside, Nassau Co., NY.
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Named Zoe, she hatched on Metompkin Island, Eastern Shore of Virginia in 2001. She was transferred to the Hawksbill Mountain hack site in Shenandoah National Park in June, and released. Zoe was one of the first Virginia falcon chicks fitted with a FalconTrak PTT (Platform Transmitter Terminal) in the project's inaugural year. She was tracked for about 6 months from Hawksbill Mountain along the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina to New York until her transmitter failed. Her last satellite-reported location, in late December 2001, was on Long Island in the general area of her current nest. Mike first saw a falcon fitted with a transmitter on November 16, 2001. She has spent each subsequent fall and winter in the area, including appearances on the Southern Nassau County Christmas Bird Count (although the Pennsylvania bird noted above may possibly have been the bird seen in some of these instances).

The smaller male of the pair was not banded or otherwise marked. Two fledglings were successfully produced and banded. After fledging, it was not unusual to see four birds on the platform in the early morning and late afternoon.

4. Great South Bay/Fire Island Inlet bridges

As was the case with the Jones Beach water tower, for years, the bridges and causeways across Great South Bay and Fire Island Inlet, from Bay Shore to Robert Moses State Park, have been a locus of year-round Peregrine activity. On 12 June 2004, while collecting Atlas data on Captree Island, Shai Mitra and Pat Lindsay observed two Peregrines hunting over

the marshes, returning with prey, and flying to a concealed site under the drawbridge between Captree Island and Captree State Park. They watched the birds circling under the bridge several times, sometimes calling and displaying, and frequently returning to the same concealed site.

Postscript. In addition to continuing Peregrine activity during 2005 at the Long Island sites described above, Mary Normandia has brought an additional breeding site to our attention. In recent years, Peregrine Falcons have frequented unused smokestacks at the LIPA power generating plant at Glenwood Landing, on the east side of Hempstead Harbor, on the north shore of Nassau County. Nesting occurred in 2004 and 2005. Both adults in 2005 showed metal bands on their right legs and red over black color bands on their left legs.

Literature Cited

References cited above, other than those from personal observations and conversations with local birders, are web sites on the internet. The references are to specific web pages, but the home pages of each site have a plethora of information on Peregrine Falcons and falcon tracking.

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