

Peregrine falcons



With its supreme aerial skills, the peregrine falcon is revered by many people for its astonishing speed in flight; its legendary dive is performed at more than 100 miles per hour.

Pigeons are the peregrine's main source of food but they take other bird species too and have on rare occasions been known to catch herons and black-backed gulls, birds the same size as themselves; carrying them back to their nest site several miles away.

Peregrines were much valued for centuries by the aristocracy for falconry. They were used to hunt wild prey and vast sums were paid for individual birds. The Scottish King James IV (1473 – 1513) is said to have paid £189 for a single bird, an immense amount at the time.



Centuries of persecution

By the 17th century fire arms became the hunting weapon of choice and the peregrine's fortunes began to turn: no longer the huntsman's friend, it was seen instead as a threat to red grouse and other birds coveted by shooters. An onslaught of persecution was unleashed on the species in the 19th century.

Further trouble lay ahead for them in the Second World War when peregrines were deemed a threat to the military effort because pigeons were widely used as message carriers. A cull took place, resulting in the killing of hundreds of birds and the destruction of numerous nests.

Worse fortune lay ahead in the 1950s: the widespread use of organochlorine agrochemicals had disastrous effects on peregrines and other top of the food chain predators such as otters: 80% of the peregrine population had gone by 1964.

Since these pesticides were banned peregrine numbers have gradually recovered, though the bird continues to be illegally persecuted in parts of Britain, particularly on land managed for grouse shooting. Egg collecting is also a threat. Peregrines have now moved into towns and cities, nesting on church rooftops and warehouses. Their territories are large and well-spaced; in 2002 there were estimated to be 1,400 pairs in the UK, in Shropshire there are 20 - 30 pairs.

Breeding

Nest building is not one of the peregrine's special arts. They simply choose a suitable ledge and the female hunkers down, to form a scrape in the earth or other debris using her chest and legs. Three to four eggs are normally laid and the incubation is shared. When they hatch the female does most of the brooding while the male hunts for food. The young fledge at 35-42 days and learn hunting skills from their parents for a further two months. Less than a third of peregrines reach breeding age.

The Forest Glen eyrie

Shropshire Wildlife Trust bought the Forest Glen, once the site of a celebrated local tea room, in 2005, with substantial assistance from Shropshire Horticultural Society. Peregrines first nested on the cliff in 2008 but then chose a nesting site elsewhere; their return to the glen this year is very welcome.

Wild and Free *Margaret E Mitchell*

Look up! Look up! Quick! Look up there
To where the rocks are bleak and bare,
Where yellow gorse clings to the ledge
Hanging precariously over the edge.
Shade your eyes from the glare of the sun
Excitingly point until you succumb
To anticipation, perchance to see
The peregrine falcons, wild and free.

Look now, again, soaring on high
A black silhouette against the bright sky.
Slowly and silently wheeling around,
My throbbing heart begins to pound.
Then in the distance a piercing keen
And a second falcon enters the scene.
Sky dancing together, a spectacular sight
An aerial ballet of seamless flight.

Then swooping down to the rock face sheer,
In a blink of an eye they disappear
Into a crevice, a secretive place
Hidden from view and world's curious face.
My eyes return from searching the sky,
My breath exhales with a contented sigh.
A memory to cherish, remembering when
The peregrines nested at the Forest Glen.



This poem was written by one of the Wrekin Forest Volunteers. This group does a magnificent job looking after the Ercall nature reserve and other wild places in the Wrekin Forest.

Shropshire Peregrine Group surveys, monitors and protects the habitats and breeding sites of peregrines. www.shropshireperegrines.co.uk

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

- Protects wildlife where you live
- Looks after 37 nature reserves
- Campaigns for wildlife and the environment
- Encourages people to enjoy nature
- Involves volunteers in all its work

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www.ShropshireWildlifeTrust.org.uk

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Photos by John Hawkins