

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

The Peregrine Falcon, now on the federal government's Endangered Species List, once bred on many Vermont cliffs and may do so once more if current reintroduction efforts are successful. Extirpated as a breeding species east of the Mississippi River by the mid-1960s, the Peregrine is included in the species accounts because of the reintroduction efforts that took place in Vermont in 1977, 1982, 1983, and 1984.

A careful search of historical data undertaken for the atlas documented 27 cliff sites where the Peregrine once bred in Vermont. Firm evidence is available for these sites in the form of photographs, collected eggs, or reports of nests or young. References exist to an additional 32 sites, but refer to "breeding" or "nesting" with no substantiating details. These historic locations occur in all of Vermont's physiographic regions.

Peregrines were already in decline in the eastern U.S. by the end of World War II as a result of the depredations of egg collectors, hunters, and farmers, and because of other human disturbances at their nesting sites; but the heavy use of pesticides in the late 1940s caused their drastic and nearly global reductions, with European and eastern North American populations especially hard hit (Ratcliffe 1967). Pesticides were widely and heavily used in Vermont in that period (R. Spear, pers. comm.).

Forbush (1927), citing Karl Pember, considered the Peregrine a rare and local summer resident in Vermont, with at least 20 pairs present here. Fortner et al. (1933) stated that there had been "a decrease from Pember's 20." Smith (1934) wrote that the Peregrine "has become increasingly rare. Only a third the number are now present in Rutland County in comparison with 50 years ago." Peregrines were photographed raising their young on White Rocks in Wallingford in the early 1950s (L. H. Potter, pers. comm.). The last documented Vermont nesting occurred in the Taconic Mountains in 1957 (W. R. Spofford, pers. comm.). The

eastern race of the Peregrine Falcon was extirpated as a breeder from the entire eastern part of the continent by 1965 (Cade 1970). A male Peregrine Falcon seen in 1968 and 1970 at Mt. Pisgah, above Lake Willoughby, could have been the last wild member of that population (Fyfe et al. 1976; Eldred, Field notes; W. Spofford, pers. comm.).

When pesticide controls led to declining levels of DDT in prey species, the Peregrine Fund at the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched a reintroduction program. Five hundred and eleven captive-produced young Peregrines were released in the east between 1975 and 1983 (Barclay and Cade 1983; J. Barclay pers. comm.). The first Vermont release took place in the Green Mountain National Forest in 1977. In 1982, 1983, and 1984, Peregrines were hacked at three Vermont sites—two in the Green Mountain National Forest, and one in east central Vermont. Hacking is the process of placing young falcons in artificial nest boxes and then releasing them; hack site attendants then provide food and protection for the young birds, while carefully avoiding direct contact with them, for the over two-month period required for them to reach independence. In Vermont 39 Peregrines have been hacked between 1977 and 1983, with 35 of the birds surviving to become independent. Some of these captive-bred falcons were sighted in 1983; and in the spring of 1984 a female released in 1982 from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science's site paired with a male in Montreal and raised 2 young on a ledge of a downtown skyscraper.

An increasing number of Peregrine Falcons are being sighted in Vermont during migration, but only a single summer sighting occurred during the 1976-81 Atlas Project: an adult was observed July 1, 1978 on the Barton Marshes of Lake Memphremagog (RVB, Summer 1978).

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