

urban antics

by John Hunter

Urban peregrine

As much as peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) are found in areas of cliff and crag, so some are found among the city high-rise of sheer concrete, glass and girders, where they perch and nest, black eyes forever staring at ant-like humans within and below.

I often stand mesmerised by a wandering speck in the sky. Inspired to speak in prose and poetry of a beast that has been revered by kings and pharaohs over thousands of years. Thus inspired, I now take leave with words to weave a picture of the falcon on the hunt.

The predator flew steeply into the gale, arching and shrugging his wings, dark on the grey clouds racing over. Peregrines love the wind as platypus love water. They will fly further, longer and higher in a gale than at any other time, to feel the encompassing pressure of air as it thunders to engulf them like the hands of their almighty maker.

The bird spread its wings and tail upon the billowing air, and then turned downwind in a long and sweeping curve, its circles stretched away to the east, blown elliptically by the force of the gale. A hundred gulls and pigeons rose as one beneath the circling falcon. So tight were they, it was as if a magic blanket had appeared. Then the bird dropped, shattering them apart like white flakes of foam on a wind torn beach.

Peregrines are occasionally seen throughout Perth and its environs. From time to time, mainly between January and July, they pass through on hunting forays or perhaps to rest awhile among city buildings. They are primarily a bird of coastal cliffs, rocky outcrops or mountainous regions and, apart from the higher areas of the southern Stirling Range and some south

coast islands, are uncommon and thinly spread.

Usually single birds are known to hunt in the open areas of Perth airport, Kewdale and the Fremantle-Leighton rail yards. Here, pigeons, gulls and similar-sized prey are most commonly found. Unfortunately, throughout the metro area, a few prized racing pigeons are also taken, much to the ire of their owners. Such is the 'jungle' out there.

Some years ago, during the building of the Bond tower in St Georges Terrace, an astonished crane driver was quite put out when he arrived for work one morning. There on his seat was a glowering peregrine with the bloodied remains of a stubble quail... a stubble quail?... Where did it get that in the CBD?

Like the local, smaller, common hobby falcon, for which they are often mistaken, peregrines have very dark head and moustachial feathers, a pattern that helps cut down reflected glare to the eyes.



They also have a short, strong, deeply hooked beak, which is conspicuously toothed and notched to break the neck of prey.

So much for a brief taste of a serious predator that shares our urban niche. If you want a brief trip back to Tolkien's Middle Earth, just look above, and keep your eyes peeled.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The peregrine falcon is mainly a bird killer, preferring prey up to about its own size (pigeons, ducks and gulls) but has been recorded attacking a storm petrel.
- They plunge at up to 300 km/h (depending on the wind velocity), punching either down into the back, or up into the belly, of a bird on the wing.
- A ridged nostril with slender internal rods enables them to breathe easily during a dive, when the air pressure is extreme.

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Executive editor Caris Bailey
Editor Carolyn Thomson-Dans.
Contributing editors David Gough, Rhianna Mooney
Scientific/technical advice Kevin Kenneally, Paul Jones, Chris Simpson, Keith Morris.
Design and production Tiffany Aberin, Maria Duthie, Natalie Jolakoski, Gooitzen van der Meer.
Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing Cathy Birch.
 Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0432.
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