

Our Diminishing Heritage

The Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), like all birds of prey, has been persecuted by man since time immemorial. The practise of "chicken-hawking", egg collecting and the indiscriminate uses of insecticides have caused this fine bird to diminish in numbers throughout the world.

There is perhaps no more marvellous spectacle in nature than that of the Peregrine Falcon, coursing and searching thousands of feet above the earth for its prey. Gliding on long pointed wings, it first appears as a speck but its silhouette is unmistakable as it searches far ahead and below.

At the sight of prey, (which is usually a bird on the wing) the Peregrine banks, goes into a stoop—with wings tight against its body and plummets out of the sun at great speed until, with talons clenched, it punches up sharply beneath the quarry. The tremendous blow, backed by the momentum of the dive, stuns even the largest of game birds and fills the sky with feathers.

The falcon carries or follows the prey to the ground where razor sharp talons and the hooked beak administer a quick death. Immediately after a kill the bird with wings outstretched, mantling, looks up to see that no other predator is preparing to snatch away the hard-won game.

This act of nature has perhaps taken a matter of seconds, but must be admired for its grace and wild freedom.

Although the forementioned is the usual practise for a kill, Peregrines have been known to attack at ground level where stones have been dislodged as the bird turns to shoot upwards through a milling flock of ducks.

Falcons are the most trimly designed of all predatory birds, both in body and plumage. They are exceptionally well-adapted for pursuit in the open. The Peregrine therefore occurs in semi-forested country in all climatic zones, showing a preference for mountainous localities of cliffs and crags. It appears less frequently in tundra and deserts. Though the area of their distribution is rather extensive, the species occurs sparingly throughout the world.

Like all falconidae the bird has a small head with dark moustachial patterns, which help to cut down reflected glare to the eyes. A short, strong, deeply hooked beak, which is conspicuously toothed and notched to break the neck of prey, is also evident.

The cere, a bare patch surrounding the nostrils is usually a pale yellow, the same as the tarsus or bare

portion of the lower leg. The feathery pants of the Peregrine cover the top third of the legs. The body is streamlined with hard and compact feathers which form long pointed wings, and the tail feathers are tapered at the tips. These enable the bird, when stooping to the prey, to reach speeds estimated at approximately 400 km/h.

To enable normal breathing while at these tremendous speeds, the bird has a complex structure of the nostril. The round ridged nostril contains a slender rod with a swelling on the end; behind this are two rising fins. When the falcon dives, air streams over the ridges and into the nostril where it is broken up by the rod and whirls. The whirl is then broken up by the fins so that it takes only a quarter of an ounce of pull to bring air from outside into the lungs.

The female Peregrine is much larger than the male, and female dominance seems to be an important factor in successful pairing. This also enables a pair to take a greater range of prey, especially when rearing young.

Although the species ranges throughout the State of Western Australia, it has been most frequently reported from the Stirling Range and also on the high granite islands of the Recherche Archipelago.

The bird seldom appears in the Perth area and rarely strays from its typical habitat.

With the Peregrine being one of the world's diminishing species it is necessary to protect them in their natural environment at all costs.

In the State of Western Australia the Peregrine Falcon is declared a rare and endangered species (*Government Gazette* 9th February, 1973) and is wholly protected throughout the whole of the State at all times. Any person who infringes that protection is liable to a penalty of \$1 000.00.

The Chief Warden of Fauna is most concerned at the attempts by some people to revive the ancient art of Falconry. Many daily hours of training and attention must be given to birds of prey to maintain peak efficiency and it is understandable why it is generally the sport of sheikhs of the Middle East and those wealthy enough to be able to devote most of their time and energy to the sport.

Also, the metabolism and diets of these meat eaters are so finely balanced, that the ability to prevent or medicate disease while the birds are in captivity, is almost impossible.



PEREGRINE FALCON

Falco peregrinus

DISTRIBUTION

Ranges throughout the State.

HABITAT

Chiefly regions of mountainous cliffs and precipices but can be found in most habitats.

DESCRIPTION

In the fully adult plumage the upper parts are slate-blue, finely barred black. Tail grey, barred black, with slight white tipping. Head, neck, cheeks and wing quills slaty-black. Breast clear chestnut-brown, abdomen chestnut spotted black, flanks, thighs and under wing coverts light chestnut narrowly barred black. Iris, brown, beak, slaty-blue, black at tip; cere, greenish-yellow; legs, yellow.

LENGTH (Average)

Male: 36 cms—39 cms

Female: 47 cms

WING SPAN (Average)

Male: 81 cms

Female: approx. 90 cms

WEIGHT (Average)

Male: 426 grams

Female: 560 grams

NEST

No nest is constructed. Two or three eggs are laid either in a tree hollow or ledge of rock on a cliff face.

FOOD

Birds on the wing, usually passerines and waterfowl. Mammals to a lesser degree.

