



## Peregrine Falcons from Idaho Eyries Part of Recovery

By Rich Howard

March 19, 2013, was a historic day for falconry in Idaho.

That day the Idaho Fish and Game Commission adopted rules governing take of American peregrine falcons – *Falco peregrinus anatum* – from Idaho eyries for the first time in more than 40 years.

In the early 1970s, Tom Smith of Blackfoot trapped the last legally taken wild peregrine falcon in Idaho before the bird was added to the endangered species list. Smith, who has been a falconer for more than 50 years, flew the captured female peregrine at wild game for a season and eventually lost her during a flight that took her downwind.

“I have gone over this probably more times than I have ever thought about any other falconry event in my life,” Smith said. In those days radio telemetry was still quite bulky, and Smith did not own or use a transmitter on the bird while hunting with her.

Even as he lost his bird, Smith was a witness to the extirpation of peregrines in Idaho.

The crash of American peregrine falcon populations, beginning in the 1950s, became most pronounced in the 1970s in Idaho. By 1970, the bird was wiped out east of the Mississippi and down to 39 known pairs in the West. The last known successful eyrie in the state was found in eastern Idaho in 1973. Surveys conducted in Idaho in 1975 revealed a single adult at one eyrie and no known productive pairs.

The peregrine was listed as endangered in 1970 under the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1966. The peregrine was included when Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

The widespread use of pesticides, particularly DDT and

Dieldrin, was blamed. Peregrines are sensitive to DDT, which causes their eggs to have thin, fragile shells.

These extinction events were happening all over North America, but biologists, including Tom Cade, who at the time was a professor of Ornithology at Cornell University in New York, were not letting this go unnoticed. Cade assembled a team and held conferences to encourage people to find the right techniques and conditions for breeding peregrine falcons in captivity.

Others worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to find cause to ban the use of DDT, which occurred in the United States in 1972. It was evident that both institutional programs, such as The Peregrine Fund, which was founded by Cade, and private projects were the key to solving this critical problem of breeding falcons in captivity. Among private projects, Les Boyd of the Moscow-Pullman area was instrumental in inventing techniques to increase the breeding success of peregrines.

In 1973, Cade, using captive peregrines borrowed from falconers, raised 20 young falcons. He released the first captive bred peregrine falcons the following year.

In 1984, The Peregrine Fund moved its captive breeding program of peregrine falcons from Colorado to Boise. With major funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, private donors and a cast of volunteers, a world class raptor breeding facility was built to house the program for re-introducing the peregrines.

Falconers, federal and state agency staffs and volunteers began building, placing and tending hack boxes during the spring. Hack boxes, such as the one found on the 14th floor of the Capital One building in downtown Boise, were placed all over the western United States. They held young peregrines

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American peregrine falcon

IDFG photo

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until they fledged in hope they would return as adults to nest.

By 1985, the Peregrine Fund was producing about 150 peregrines a year. Some were kept for breeding, but most were released to the wild to reoccupy recovering habitat that was no longer subject to the effects of pesticides. The captive breeding and hacking efforts were highly successful throughout the western United States, including Idaho.

Bruce Haak, an Idaho Fish and Game nongame biologist and active falconer played a key role in maintaining the hack box program in Idaho. Ed Levine, a Peregrine Fund employee, did the nesting surveys each year. This level of effort continued every year until 2009 when Fish and Game switched to monitoring every three years, consistent with delisting requirements.

On August 25, 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the peregrine falcon from the endangered species list. In the spring of 2010, Idaho Fish



From the left: Rich Howard, Jim Younk, Brad Compton, IFA Photo courtesy of Deno Newbold members Scott Nichols, Dave Smith and Deno Newbold.

and Game, after approval by the Idaho Legislature, removed the peregrine from the state’s list of endangered animals.

In 2012, Fish and Game biologists, master naturalists and other volunteers surveyed 45 nesting sites. Twenty six

pairs of peregrines produced 46 young at 20 successful eyries.

At this point, Scott Nichols, Paul Mascuch and Dave Smith, president of the Idaho Falconers Association, started a dialogue with Brad Compton and Rex Sallabanks of Fish and Game about establishing rules for taking wild peregrines in Idaho for falconry. Over the past year, they wrote rules for the “take” of peregrine falcons.

The positive peregrine nesting data sets in the 2012 Fish and Game report compiled by Colleen Moulton justified a limited take of two wild-caught peregrines annually from Idaho.

The subsequent approval of the rules by the commission brought full circle from 40 years ago a significant history lesson in conservation – and much of it happened here in Idaho.

*Rich Howard is a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wildlife biologist and a long-time avid falconer.*



Tom Smith’s peregrine, the last wild peregrine captured in Idaho for falconry. Courtesy Tom Smith

**Idaho Fish and Game News**

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Published by Idaho Fish and Game  
600 South Walnut  
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E-mail: idfginfo@idfg.idaho.gov  
http://fishandgame.idaho.gov  
Volume 25, Number 5

**Idaho Fish and Game Policy**

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission’s policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor’s office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.





# Rules Set for Capturing Wild Peregrines

Idaho Fish and Game will allocate peregrine capture permits by random drawing.

Two permits will be issued annually. One is a statewide permit and the other is limited to nestling only in Lemhi and Custer counties or a recently-fledged juvenile statewide.

Only Idaho resident falconers with a master class license may apply for either permit, but not both. The application period is March 15 through April 15. Successful applicants will be notified by April 25.

Only licensed Idaho resident falconers with a valid capture permit may attempt to capture or possess an Idaho wild-caught peregrine.

Successful permit holders must wait two years before applying for another capture permit. A falconer who draws a permit but fails to capture a bird may apply for a permit in subsequent years.

Falconers possessing a valid permit may capture only one nestling or juvenile peregrine falcon. The capture season runs from May 1 to August 31.

A nestling falcon may be taken only between 15 and 28 days old in the nest, and only from a nest with a least two nestlings. At least one nestling must remain after take.

Recently-fledged juvenile birds may be trapped. Adult peregrines inadvertently trapped must be released unharmed immediately at the capture site.

Any bird inadvertently killed during a capture attempt will be included as part of the annual peregrine capture quota.

Capturing nestlings from eyries located on man-made structures is prohibited.

Fish and Game may transfer abandoned or prematurely fledged nestlings to peregrine capture permit holders, but the transfer would be voluntary and counted as part of the annual capture quota.

Additional restrictions may apply to capture on tribal lands, state parks, national parks or federal wildlife refuges.

Two years after capture, peregrines may be transferred between currently licensed Master Class falconers only, and they may not be transferred out of state without a Fish and Game issued wildlife export permit.

The sale, purchase or barter of wild-caught peregrines is prohibited. Nor may wild-caught birds be released back to the wild without Fish and Game approval.

All federal regulations under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act also apply.

Within five days of capture of a wild juvenile peregrine, the falconer must:

- Band it with a band provided with the capture permit, and must present the banded bird for inspection by Idaho Fish and Game within five days of capture.
- Report the sex of the bird and the GPS coordinates of the capture location to Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Register the capture with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

After the bird is 30 days old, the falconer is asked to submit two plucked breast feathers to Idaho Fish and Game. The feathers will be sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service for DNA analysis.

# Fast Facts on Falcons

- 15 to 21 inches, wingspan 40 inches.
- About two pounds; females larger.
- Live 7 to 15 years; up to 20 years.
- Begin breeding at about two years old.
- Mating season late March – May.
- Courtship lasts about a month, includes aerial displays by male.
- Nest, or scrape, is a shallow depression on ledges or small caves on a cliff face. Some nest in man-made nest boxes on bridges and tall buildings.
- The female lays three to five eggs – slightly smaller than chicken eggs and mottled dark, reddish-brown.
- Incubation takes 29 to 32 days.
- Both adults incubate the eggs.
- Both adults care for the nestlings, called an “eyas,” pronounced I-es.
- Nestlings double their weight in six days; at three weeks they will be 10 times the size when hatched.
- They start to fly in about 42 days.
- Adults have dark blue-gray wings, backs barred with black; pale undersides; white faces with a black stripe on each cheek; large, dark eyes.
- Often mates for life and breeds in the same territory each year.
- Peregrines clocked at about 200 mph in a dive, and 62 mph in level flight.
- Prey is caught in flight and includes ducks, pheasants, and pigeons.
- Peregrines have few natural predators.

## Nongame Program Funding

Idaho Fish and Game is responsible for about 10,000 species of fish, wildlife and plants. About 550 are vertebrate animals, 80 percent of which are classified as “nongame wildlife” and include the peregrine.

To pay for nongame species conservation, Fish and Game relies on donations, the sale of specialty wildlife license plates, and a state income tax check-off.

Revenue from wildlife license plate sales provides most of the income to the nongame trust account and the critical match with which to leverage federal funds, such as state wildlife grants.

No state tax revenue goes into any Fish and Game budget.



A peregrine falcon approaches the nest box in downtown Boise.

Photo by Vicky Osborn



# Peregrine Comeback on Live Display in Downtown Boise

By Bruce Haak

In 1988, five male peregrine falcons, imported from a falcon-breeder in Canada, were released from off the former Idaho First Bank Building, the tallest building in downtown Boise.

It was one of the first steps in the return of peregrines to southwestern Idaho.

In the 1980s, for financial reasons, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana were involved in a joint peregrine release effort in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. Wayne Melquist was the Idaho Fish and Game Nongame Program leader, and I was the single nongame staffer.

The idea was to create a pool of nesting peregrines that would eventually establish a viable breeding population that would radiate young into the adjacent states. While the concept was sound, the process takes many decades to complete.

In an effort to gain public support for the Nongame Program – now known as the Wildlife Diversity Program – and to speed up peregrine recovery in southwestern Idaho, Melquist directed me to develop a release program in downtown Boise.

Unable to find domestic source of pure *Falco peregrinus anatum* peregrines, I contacted a falcon-breeder in Canada and imported five male peregrines that were released in downtown Boise.

The following year, The Peregrine Fund provided three peregrines for release at Key Bank in Boise.

In the winter of 1990, Rich Howard and a friend observed two adult peregrines – a male and a female – at the Amalgamated Sugar Co. in Nampa. We could tell from the bands that the male had been released in Boise in 1988. The female was from a hawk tower in southwestern Montana.

The falcons seemed to be forming a pair, so I built some nest boxes and placed one on top of the sugar plant silo and one on a 14th floor ledge of the Key Bank’s One Capital Center in Boise.

The Nampa site has been occupied by breeding peregrines ever since.

The Key Bank box was occupied by

an unpaired male in 1997, and a pair produced three young in 1998. But the male disappeared when the three nestlings were about 21 days old. The female carried on as a single parent and fledged her young.

Curiously, the female accepted coturnix quail, presented near the nest box, to feed her young. In a similar event at the Nampa sugar plant, however, the female rejected offered quail and instead continued to feed the young with food that she captured – no small feat.

But there was no further successful breeding at the Key Bank nest box until a new pair was established in 2003.

Since then, they have been regular breeders in downtown Boise.

One young peregrine from Nampa wintered in San Diego Bay it’s first year and was killed at an airport in Los Angeles the next winter. Some locally produced birds have been found dead here. Beyond that, not much is known



Photo by Vicky Osborn

A peregrine nestling gets banded at the nest box in Boise.

about the fates of local birds. The return rate on banded birds is low – less than 2 percent.

Peregrines from this region would be expected to winter in southern states, Mexico and Central America.

*Bruce Haak is a retired Idaho Fish and Game biologist and an active falconer.*

## Significant webcam dates at the Boise nest box:

Event	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
First egg laid	April 10	April 16	April 7	unk	April 1
Last egg laid	April 17	April 23	April 14	April 30	April 8
Hatching began	May 17	May 25	May 16	June 4	
Last hatch	May 18	May 26	May 17	June 4	
First fledge	June 25	July 1	June 24	July 13	

This year is the fifth that a webcam has followed the activities at a nest box on the 14th floor of One Capital Center, 10th and Main streets. The web camera is sponsored by The Peregrine Fund, Idaho Fish and Game, and Fiberpipe. The webcam may be seen at: [peregrinefund.org/falconcam/](http://peregrinefund.org/falconcam/).

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