

Peregrins/from A1

BLINDING SPEED

Peregrine falcons are about the size of a crow, but all similarities end there. They have black caps on their heads, their backs and wings are a slate blue-gray, and their chests and legs are cream-colored with dark bars. And as with most birds of prey, the females are about 1/3 larger than males.

But any description fails to capture what is most mind-boggling about peregrines — their speed.

Literally everything about their bodies is built to go fast. When they climb to altitude and then fold their wings and tip toward the ground, they are a perfect torpedo shape, capable of achieving speeds in excess of 200 mph, making them the fastest animal in the world.

They have special baffles in their noses so the howling airflow doesn't harm their lungs. A clear eyelid called a nictitating membrane lubricates their eyeballs, clearing them of debris and allowing the birds to see as the plummet toward earth in a stoop. And their eyes themselves have extraordinarily fast nerve connections, meaning the birds can process the world hurtling toward them at breakneck pace.

It all adds up to speeds that an Indy-car driver would envy: The fastest peregrine ever recorded was stooping at 242 mph.

"Their nictitating membranes are sort of like wearing goggles," said Amy Ries, a scientist with the Raptor Resource Project, which has helped Xcel with its nesting box for more than a decade. "They also have an interesting adaptation — they have two points of focus in their eyes, one in front and one on the side. I often wonder, what would that be like? Are you seeing at two times speed? Four times speed? Do I look slow to you? Just everything about them is about speed."

At more than 200 mph, a peregrine like Penny clobbers its defenseless prey — almost exclusively other birds — with a clenched foot so hard that it can rip right through the victim. If

the blow somehow doesn't kill its target, the falcon will use its beak to quickly break its neck.



Fulweber



Hall

"I've never seen an actual kill, but I have been out making my rounds and heard the thump, and looked up and seen just a poof of feathers and a bird flying away carrying another bird," Ashland Xcel Plant Manager David Fulweber said. "You definitely know when they're here because you'll

hear them, and there won't be as many pigeons around."

WELCOMING THEM HOME

Lynn Hall, an environmental analyst for Xcel plants across northern Wisconsin, said she and other employees at Bay Front have come to look forward to the peregrine arrivals every spring. But for several years, no one was sure if the birds ever would settle there.

A former plant supervisor first came up with the idea of building a nesting box at Bay Front after reading about the success falcons were having at other power plants, Hall said.

Like other raptors, peregrines were nearly wiped out by the early 1970s through widespread use of the insecticide DDT. Birds would eat prey contaminated with DDT, which in turn caused their eggs to have such thin shells that they broke during incubation.

DDT use was banned in the U.S. in 1972, but

by 1975, the entire North American population of nesting peregrine pairs was down to 324. Efforts immediately began to breed birds in captivity and release them into the wild.

"This was really a home-grown movement," Ries said. "There were falconers who got together to raise them, to produce chicks in captivity, and they had to do it really, really quickly because they were disappearing rapidly. Our organization was part of that effort."

"It's really wonderful how they have returned," she said. "The story is a really important story because it shows that we can make a difference, and making a difference isn't the problem of any one person. It took a lot of people working together to make this happen."

As populations began slowly rebuilding, conservation organizations sought other ways to help the birds recover. Power plants like Bay Front were part of their answer.

"But after we built our nesting box, they never came," Hall said. "Then the DNR had us close the box because they were worried about the terns in the area. Finally, when they tore down the Oredock — they had to delay that a year because there were peregrines nesting there — we got our first pair."

The terns the DNR was concerned about are common terns, which are anything but common. Chequamegon Bay is one of just five places in Wisconsin that the birds nest, and peregrines are no respecters of endangered



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Xcel Energy's Lynn Hall and Dale Micheletti help Amy Ries of the Raptor Resource Project band chicks in 2017.



WANT A LOOK?

Like other falcons, Ashland's male peregrine plucks his prey before bringing it to his mate who tears it apart and feeds it to chicks. He prefers to roost on the tall power pole immediately west of the power plant to do his plucking. Watch for him there early in the morning and at dusk.

The nesting box sat atop the power plant for several years until the Oredock was torn down and a pair that lived there — Butch and Bebe — relocated to the box.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ED MONROE

species laws; they'll hunt any bird that looks appetizing.

But when the Oredock came down in 2013, its peregrines moved to Xcel's box, high atop the plant and next to a smokestack that provides a great vantage point for hunters, replicating their natural nesting sites on rocky cliffs.

"Power plants are really great nesting sites," Hall said. "They're next to water, they're tall and have a lot of open air around them. Power plants have produced more than 1,000 peregrine babies and this site has hatched 27 so far."

MAKING BABIES

Hall and Ries of the Raptor Resource Project have midwived several pairs of peregrines since 2014. The first were Butch and Bebe — Hall and Xcel staff members have named all the birds over the years — who together hatched 10 eggs and raised five chicks to adulthood. But in 2016, something must have happened to Butch because Bebe returned in the spring of 2017 with Baby Face, a falcon that hatched in 2010 in Iowa. They had 12 chicks, five of which survived to fly south, before something happened to both of them. In 2020, the box went unoccupied, but in 2021, Scottie, from the Houghton/Hancock area, and Scarlet, from the Raven Cliff, Minn., moved

in and hatched three eggs, with two chicks making it to adulthood.

What happened to Scarlet and Scottie, no one knows. But in 2022, Penny, a 2-year-old from Manitowoc and a male that Hall named Peter successfully hatched and raised two more chicks.

Hall suspects the birds that showed up at the plant in early April this year are Penny and Peter; until someone gets a close photo of the band on the female's leg, she won't know for sure.

Shortly after they arrived, both birds were seen out hunting around the power plant and over the Bay.

"Peregrines like to nest in high places near water, right?" Ries said. "Over water, their prey has no place to hide, no cover. We have nest boxes on several Xcel plants, and frequently plants also have an issue with pigeons. Peregrines are fantastic natural pigeon control because they love eating pigeons, so it's a perfect fit."

Though pigeons make up a substantial portion of an urban peregrine's prey, they will target birds as small as hummingbirds and as large as ducks. In fact, they have been recorded killing and eating more than 300 different species — more than any other raptor.

They most often seek prey at dawn or dusk, and the power plant's location near the Fish Creek inlet makes

the wetlands along Highway 2 a likely area to spot one hunting.

Peregrines typically reach breeding age at about 2-3 years old, and a pair will mate for life — usually about 12-15 years once they survive to adulthood. They will vigorously defend their territory against interlopers — at least one instance of a peregrine killing a bald eagle that got too close to its nest is documented — to ensure there's enough prey for them and their young.

THE NEXT GENERATION

If all goes according to plan, the Ashland pair will lay its eggs on a bed of rocks — no nest needed — any time now, and a month later two or three will hatch. It will take them another six weeks or so to fledge, and during that time they will depend upon their parents for everything.

When they are about three weeks old, Ries will get involved. She'll come to Ashland to scale the power plant and briefly kidnap the chicks.

"First you need to check to see if the parents are really aggressive, basically by popping your head up," she said. "They'll take a couple of dives at you and if they're really aggressive, they hit you — not at 200 miles per hour, but they'll still give you a good whack."

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