

# Peregrine Falcon

*Falco peregrinus*

Class: Aves  
Order: Falconiformes  
Family: Falconidae  
Genus: Falco

## Distribution

The Peregrine is the world's most widespread bird of prey. It breeds from the tundra in Alaska and Canada to the tropics.

## Habitat

It requires open country with the presence of enough food in the form of other birds and cliffs for nesting.

## Food

Its diet consists almost exclusively of medium-sized birds such as doves, waterfowl and pigeons, but it will on occasion hunt small reptiles, insects or even small mammals.

## Reproduction

They breed for the first time at age two or three. Prior to egg laying, the pair performs a courtship ritual of aerial acrobatics, precise spirals and steep dives. The male passes prey to the female in mid-air, who flies upside-down to receive it from his talons.



They nest around the Bay of Fundy. Likely to be seen soaring overhead.

There are approximately 19 recognized subspecies, varying in appearance and range. It is a permanent resident in mild-winter regions of North America, especially along the coasts. Most Arctic and northern breeding birds migrate great distances south into South America during the winter months. A single bird can fly as far as 500 km in one day.

It has found its habitat requirements in such diverse regions as the Arctic tundra, along major rivers in the northern and temperate forests, in mountains, along the coasts and on islands where there are rocky crags. It is even found in the eucalyptus forests of Australia. In recent years, they have begun to colonize urban areas.

It hunts at dawn and dusk, when its prey is most active. In cities it will also hunt nocturnally, particularly during migration periods when it targets nocturnal migrants. It requires open spaces in order to hunt. Prey is spotted either from a high perch or from the air and is struck in mid-air with a clenched foot that stuns or kills it on impact. It will then turn and catch its prey in mid-air as it falls, or follow heavier prey to the ground where it is killed and eaten. Prey is plucked before it is consumed.

They mate for life, returning to the same territory annually. The female chooses the nest site and scrapes a shallow hollow in loose soil, sand or gravel, usually on the edge of a steep, inaccessible cliff or sometimes on a tall man-made structure such as a building or bridge. Southerly exposures are favoured and most cliff nests are on ledges with vegetation, situated under an overhang. No nesting materials are added. They are very territorial and nests are generally more than 1 km apart, even in areas with large populations. Two to five eggs are laid, which are incubated for 29 to 33 days by both parents. The female will re-lay a second clutch if the first is lost early in the season.



### Development

A newly hatched chick is covered in creamy white down and has feet that are disproportionately large. Feathering begins at roughly three weeks and is complete by week six.

### Characteristics

Large, crow-sized raptor with a blue-gray back and white to rusty underparts barred with bands of dark brown or black. It has a distinctive black facial mask resembling a helmet.

### Adaptations

Its small head, long pointed wings and firm, compact plumage allow it to reach speeds of over 300 km/h when diving. It is the fastest animal in the world. It flies with quick, powerful wing strokes, and is capable of soaring to heights of 600 metres.

### Status/ Threats

Its natural enemies are large eagles and owls. It is also susceptible to a range of parasites and pathogens. A favourite of falconers for over 3,000 years, it is vulnerable to the collecting of its eggs and young for this purpose. It is also used to scare birds away from airports to reduce bird-plane strikes.

### Sightings in Nova Scotia

Migratory peregrines are seen frequently overhead.

The male brings food to the nest, but the chicks are fed by the female who stays at the nest to care for the young. She will brood the chicks almost continuously until they are 10 days old. Chicks fledge 35 to 42 days after hatching, with males generally making their first flights when a few days younger than the females. The young remain dependant on their parents for up to two months. Mortality in the first year is between 59-70%. Lifespan in the wild can be as much as 15 years.

Body length is between 34-50 cm, with a wingspan of 80-120 cm. Males and females are similar in appearance, although males frequently have much paler breasts. The females are also larger by about 30 percent. Males generally weigh 440-750 grams and the noticeably larger females can weigh between 910-1500 grams. The cere and feet are yellow and the beak and claws are black. It has long, tapered wings and a slim, short tail and plumage which does not vary seasonally.

A notch near the tip of its upper beak enables it to kill avian prey by severing the spinal column at the neck. Its large, strong beak has a hook-shaped tip perfectly adapted for tearing flesh. Air pressure from its 300 km/h dives, or 'stoops' as they are called, could damage its lungs, and so it has small bony tubercles in its nostrils that guide the shock waves of air entering the nostrils, reducing the change in air pressure and making it easier for it to breathe. It has a third eyelid known as a nictitating membrane which spreads tears and clears debris from its eyes while maintaining vision. Its eyesight is extremely acute, even in dim light.

It became an endangered species due to the use of pesticides, especially DDT. DDE, the breakdown product of DDT, moved up the food chain and collected in their bodies, resulting in the laying of very thin-shelled eggs which often broke during incubation. Since DDT was banned in North America and Europe in the early 1970's, it has made a comeback and was removed from the endangered list in 1999. A massive effort to restore Peregrine populations continent-wide resulted in large scale protection of nesting sites and upwards of 4,000 captive bred birds being released throughout Canada and the United States. It is still considered a species at risk in Canada even though its IUCN Red List status is classified as Least Concern as of 2008.

Peregrine Falcons are often observed in the summer soaring along shorelines near the Bay of Fundy. Nesting pairs are returning to Nova Scotia after a long absence.