

Peregrines Show How Collaboration Leads to Success

Perched High Above West Linn, Ore. — When a major construction project on the Abernethy Bridge was still in the planning stages, peregrine falcons, who reside in scrapes (nests on ledges), were considered during all phases of the project’s concept, design and execution. Fortunately, our Region 1 team knew exactly how best to accommodate the winged inhabitants.

To protect them, Biologist Ben White worked with construction crews and environmental consultants to encourage the peregrines to shelter in a location safer for the birds – as well as for the workers below.

While the peregrine falcon family did not respond to interview requests for this story, White and peregrine falcon expert Bob Sallinger agreed to share the experiences they’ve had with Oregon’s fastest creatures.

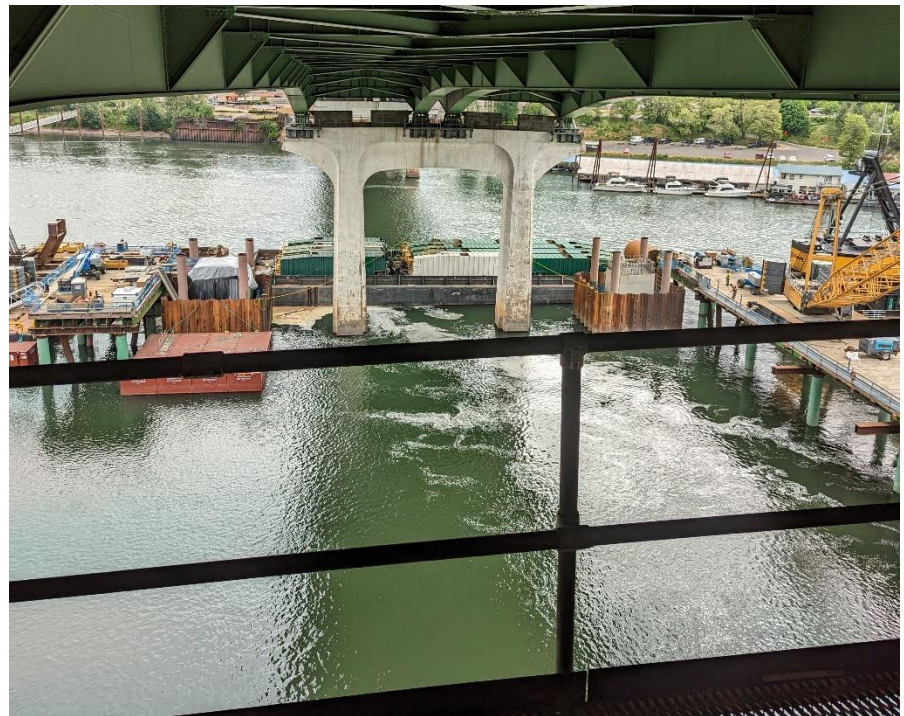
“The most gratifying part is being able to facilitate a true collaboration between environmental nonprofits, consultants and ODOT Maintenance and Construction crews to protect wildlife while ODOT completes the important work they are doing,” White said. “It’s about coming together and problem solving rather than being on opposing sides.”



These eyyases (peregrine falcon chicks) at the Abernethy Bridge.



Peregrines do not build nests but prefer ledges with gravel and grit called scrapes.



View of the Abernethy Bridge from the scrape.

Our questions answered by White and Sallinger

Peregrine falcons are not new to the Abernethy Bridge. How long have they been living there?

Peregrine falcons have been nesting on this bridge for more than 20 years. Because this was a known nesting site long before planning for the bridge replacement, we coordinated and minimized impacts in the design package for this project.

In general terms, what is the approach taken when peregrine falcons are discovered on or near ODOT facilities?

We actively monitor ODOT's bridge nests for bridge maintenance activities. The best thing for these birds is usually to be hands off; they are highly territorial. They know what is best, so we will note the nest exists and leave it alone unless we determine a specific conflict is likely. When conflicts do arise, we have a Peregrine Falcon Management Plan to guide our responses.

When disturbances cannot be avoided, we work closely with Bob Sallinger from the consulting firm Mason Bruce and Girard to develop specific strategies to minimize impacts. In extreme situations, peregrines have been removed by Sallinger and raised in captivity before being released back into the wild, but that has not been necessary for more than a decade.

Where else are peregrines present and monitored?

In the Portland Metropolitan region, peregrines live and are consistently monitored on ODOT bridges, including the Abernethy, Boone, Fremont, Glenn Jackson, Interstate, Marquam and St. Johns.

Safety concerns for the newest peregrine falcon family on the Abernethy Bridge prompted moving the original nesting site to a safer location. How was this achieved?

We prioritize providing space for peregrine falcons to exist. Generally, we try to avoid impacts through time restrictions and monitoring. At times, we will try to deter them from nesting in high-risk areas and encourage them to nest in less hazardous areas for both worker and bird safety.

In this project, we removed nesting material and limited visibility to and from the original nesting sites. At the same time, we built nest boxes in different, safer locations. We then began weekly monitoring of the birds to ensure our efforts were successful. We have continued to monitor to make sure that our construction actions aren't resulting in negative impacts to these birds as they hatch and grow.

Our role at ODOT is to find a way for the birds and the project to coexist. If that is not possible, the role is to minimize harm.

Just how resilient are these birds in an urban environment?

Peregrines are resilient, especially with disturbances that are in place when they select a nest site, such as freeway noise, industrial impacts, etc. Concerns arise when the background changes to something new, especially if it involves new activity in the airspace close to the nest site.

Can you discuss the earliest days of our protections for peregrines?

Since the early 1990s when a pair of then-endangered peregrines first showed up on the Fremont Bridge, ODOT did an outstanding job to protect these birds. Since then, peregrines have established nest sites on several bridges, with ODOT playing an important role in helping the birds recover and flourish in Oregon. ODOT has worked with environmental groups such as Portland Audubon and Willamette Riverkeepers, as well as consultants Mason Bruce and Girard, to devise a comprehensive program over three decades. Some ODOT bridges have been among the most productive peregrine nest sites in the state of Oregon.

What makes ODOT peregrine falcons unique (if not “weird”)?

While some peregrines can migrate thousands of miles each year, most birds living above ODOT roads and bridges typically stay local throughout the year.

Peregrine Falcon Factoids

Scientific Name: *Falco peregrinus* (wandering falcon).

Tale of the Tape: Peregrine falcon bodies can measure 14-19 inches with a wingspan of up to 3.6 feet. Males are about the size of a crow and females are about the size of a raven.

Weight: Typically, between 1 and 3 pounds. Females are about a third larger than males.

Average Lifespan: Up to 17 years, although scientists are uncertain due to lingering effects of the agricultural insecticide DDT.

Falcon Terms

Scrape: Peregrines do not build nests but prefer ledges with gravel and grit.

Eyrie: Peregrine nesting spot.

Eyas (singular)/Eyyases (plural): Peregrine chick(s).

I can’t dive 55... The fastest creatures on the planet, peregrine falcons can reach speeds of more than 200 mph in dives.

And you thought your commute was too long! Some peregrine falcons migrate as far as 16,000 miles round trip each year, although some are more sedentary and prefer to work from home.

Location, location, location. Peregrine falcons are extremely adaptable and can live in almost all-weather conditions, from the desert to the Arctic, from sea level to the mountains.

No learner’s permits required. Female peregrine falcons will lay one to four eggs. Both parents incubate them for a month until hatching. Chicks stay in the nest for approximately six weeks and typically remain in the nest area for most of the summer, learning to hunt from their parents.

Not guano go there! One of the benefits of embracing peregrine falcons on our bridges is a reduction in pigeon poop, which is corrosive and capable of weakening concrete and steel. Our peregrine falcons mainly prey on pigeons, or at least scare them away.

The Original Eco-Warriors: Peregrine falcons came to national attention in the 1960s and 1970s when their eggshells were made dangerously thin because of pervasive use of the pesticide DDT. DDT was banned in 1972 and peregrines were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Decades of efforts allowed peregrine falcon populations to recover to the point they were delisted in 1999, and today, populations are considered healthy.

Source: National Geographic & Bird Watching Academy