

Peregrine Falcon

Breeds for the first time in Central London

By
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Male peregrine on guard

Peregrines have been seen over London regularly in recent years, mainly during the winter months. Their breeding range has expanded from the south-west along the western coast since DDT was stopped being used. They can now be seen in areas with suitable habitat. As these sites were occupied birds started to look for new regions to colonise, as these hadn't got their natural requirements birds looked at man made structures i.e.; cooling towers and church spires, they are now also using pylons. In 2000 birds bred in London on Battersea Power Station and the year later another pair was seen around the Dome. These have attempted to breed; the site chosen though gets washed out when it rains. In February of 2001 I observed a pair locking talons about 1000 ft above Regents Park. This was possibly the first observation of this behaviour over central London. During 2002 there were increased sightings of birds on the Bankside Power Station (Tate Modern) these were presumed to be the birds from Battersea.

In late winter 2003 there were increased sightings along the Marylebone Road. Birds were regularly seen perched on the top of a large hotel. These we observed mating on a nearby building, but we were unsure whether they had a nest-site in the area. D. Johnson and another local birder and I kept a watch out for any Peregrine activity. The birds were finally traced to The University of Westminster, after we had seen the male bring in a prey item to the west ledge and the female coming off the nest and taking it away to eat. The university were made aware of the situation and we waited. The expected date of hatching arrived but the female and male were not to be seen, something was wrong. It was decided to go up onto the roof to see what had happened; we were able to look down on to the ledge, all that was there was an empty scrape. We believe that the eggs were stolen, though there is no proof of this. We decided as the birds were absent to build a nest box. We positioned the box in the corner they had nested in; we added substrate (gravel) to all other suitable ledges. The birds did return to the building after a few weeks but took up station on the eastern side. The birds stayed throughout the summer but didn't attempt to breed. During the autumn at a meeting of the Peregrine Action Group it was decided to install a nest box on the east ledge. The RSPB funded this box it was mounted at the end of the year.

Birds were sighted increasingly as spring approached. An aerial food pass took place over Regents Park in early April at which time presumed egg laying had commenced. D Johnson then started to watch the nest pre-dawn for a few hours before coming to work. We then kept watch through the day for any abnormal behaviour from the birds. This could indicate that they felt threatened and the eggs were in danger. Dave would then return to his secret view point after work staying until dark. This was carried out to give the birds the best possible chance of succeeding. By the end of the summer he had put in over 500 hours of surveillance. His wife was very understanding and realised how important these birds were and how persecuted they are. The incubation period went smoothly with a change in how the female was sitting being noticed in early May this indicated that the eggs were hatching but how many. Several days' later three young had been seen, the male doing most of his hunting at first light. On occasions the female would take the prey item and take it to one of her favourite eating or cache sites. She was noted flying all the way over to the Tate Modern to eat one of these items or for a spruce up away from hungry youngsters.

One morning Dave phoned to say that he could only see two young in the nest. Mortality is only to be expected in birds of prey especially when it's the parents first breeding attempt, we could live with that. However that evening he called me at home and said one of the other two surviving young had stumbled around a partition wall, and had missed two feeds. At that time of night there was nothing we could do, the next morning Dave was on watch again. Fortunately the young were still alive but still separated, the parents bringing food to the nest but not having the brains to walk down to the misplaced bird. It was decided that we would have to intervene if the bird was to survive. Calls were made to the RSPB and English Nature to get the okay; these are schedule 1 birds and cannot be disturbed without a license. Permission was granted and I met Dave down at the University with the equipment needed to rescue the bird. As fortune would have it on route I came across a road casualty in the shape of a Feral Pigeon that we could be feed to the youngster. All went according to plan with the bird rescued and back in the nest within 10 minutes



Chick after it was rescued

It was also decided that the young would be ringed. As this was a first breeding attempt, there wasn't time for a coloured ringing scheme to be organised. The nearest qualified ringer was located and a date was set. Timing was important; the birds had to be ringed before they became too mobile. At that height if they were to fall off the ledge they would certainly have died. The morning arrived, once up on the roof the ringer assessed the situation, geared himself up and lowered himself down. The female was flushed from the nest when she heard activity on the roof, she didn't leave the area and continually circled overhead calling. The juveniles just sat huddled in the corner, both were ringed, going on the size difference were thought to be male and female. Again this was carried out quickly and smoothly with the young seemingly unconcerned.

Our next decision was when to go public with this news, it was decided to let Wildlife for All know and they in turn let the RSPB know. News was then released to the press, stating that there was to be a watch point in Marylebone Green for 1 week. The news didn't hit the papers and the TV until the Tuesday. During the week at least 1500 people stopped to see the birds with many becoming so keen to observe their lives and behaviour, they became daily visitors to the park. When they were informed that dawn was the best time to witness hunting and the arrival of food, they were arriving at 5.30am then going to work and then returning after work some with their children.

The day then arrived for the birds to fledge, one that we have been dreading. Would they make it, for several days the juvenile males wing flapping was becoming more regular. With him leaping into the air and flying several feet along the ledge, our hearts were in our mouths. Early one morning Dave phoned to say the male had left the nest and he was looking for it. He found it perched above Marylebone Road calling for his parents, who occasionally circled to chase off the Herring Gulls that were mobbing it. It was a greed that he would stay, keeping me informed while I performed my duties and return as soon as possible. We couldn't bare the thought of the bird coming to grief in the road. I arrived back to find the bird hadn't moved. Then suddenly it was off and we were running, it was attempting to get back to the nest ledge. From where it was it had to gain 100 ft it circled once but became in patient and tried to swoop up, crashing into a window 16 floors up and sliding down the glass, it was lost to view. By the time we had run to that side of the building there was know trace of the bird. We searched but couldn't relocate it, we then noticed workers from inside the building pointing up to the flats opposite. The bird was sat on a ledge running between two attic windows, looking down at what was going on four floors below. It seemed quite content only occasionally making an attempt to scramble up the tiles to gain height. Again I left Dave, then at 12.30 am he phoned, the bird had

flown. It was now perched on a window-sill only 10 ft above the ground and very close to the main road. We decided it had to be caught, the Metropolitan Polices' wildlife crime unit were contacted, they agreed with us. I took a couple of nets down and assessed the best line of attack. If luck was on my side I could by keeping close to the wall creed along out of site. Dave was to distract the bird; I got into a position with the net below the bird. I brought the net up, the bird dropped into it, Dave rushed in to extract him, and it was placed in a box, all in a matter of seconds. Now what, we could not take the bird back up to the top of the building by its nest for fear of the remaining youngster coming off to soon. The university allowed us to take the bird up onto the roof of its lecture rooms. This was not the best location, as it was still some 100 ft below the nest. It was our only option; maybe the parents would come down and feed it here. How wrong we were the juvenile decided to walk around the edge of the roof, it was then out of site of the parents, its calls drowned by the roar of the traffic below. It was decided more help was needed, members of the public at the watch point were told of the dramas of the day. Some agreed to come over and help just in case the bird came down in the road and we needed there assistance to stop the traffic. By now the bird would have been very hungry; it was left to roost on its own as night fell. In the morning it had moved but where to. It hadn't gone far; it was back close to ware we had released it. We decided to take some meat up and leave it as close to the bird as I could approach. Dave was to keep an eye on the bird in case it flew, food was left but the bird showed no interest. It then flew; it seemed fairly strong and was gaining altitude. Was it going to make it, no it missed the ledge by a foot or two, it regained its composure swinging round and landing on the adjacent building, this was the same height as the nest-site and only 10 yard gap separated the two buildings. It should be safe here, in no time it had made the short hop back to the nest-site and safety. We hoped that when his sister went things would run more smoothly, it went better but not perfectly. She left the nest ledge just after dawn and dropped down onto the roof of the administration block. Here she spent most of the morning walking along some window boxes, being the star attraction as students and staff turned up for work. Most of the time she seemed to knap, then at around 11.30am she became more active. As she made her way along the ledge she came to a flight of stairs. Here she couldn't see us and we couldn't see her, if we were to catch her now was the time. Dave kept an eye on her movements as I crept up the stairs, by watching her shadow I waited until she came to a corner and pounced. She was netted and boxed, this time we could take her up to the top of the building she had come from. We released her onto the top, by the time we had reached the ground floor she was sat on the wall above the nest.



Juvenile male being rescued

The birds continued to draw people from within London and even further a field that had seen or heard about them on web-sites or in the media. To watch as they began to master the skies was privilege that I and everybody who witnessed this event will never forget. The bird eventually moved off into the city where the hunting may be slightly easier. On occasions they were all to be seen perched on the Tate Modern.

We look forward to their return in 2005.

Photo Gallery can be found [here](#)