

Peregrine Falcons

Did They Return In 2005?

By

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Female preparing breakfast

The pair of falcons and their young had left the university and the immediate area by the middle of July 2005. The family had taken up residence in their wintering area on or close to The Tate Modern. The RSPB had set up a viewing point by the gallery bringing these special birds to the attention of hundreds of passers by. The birds could be seen perched on the chimney, or watched as they honed their hunting skills in the sky above with the help of the parents. The young female was the first bird to go her own way, followed at sometime during early autumn by the young male. After that we are uncertain of their whereabouts. Reports did come in of sightings to the northwest and along the Lea Valley of Peregrines. These though did not state the age or sex of the birds seen.

While the adults were away from the university it was agreed that any maintenance work to the building or by those firms who had phone masts on the roof would have to be completed by the end of January. It was then that we decided certain precautions would have to be carried out to prevent the mishaps that occurred the previous year, and had resulted in the death of one of the fledglings. Dave Morrison also a member of the Peregrine Action Group, a qualified climber was contacted. He was only too happy to help, if it meant another success for the birds. The scrape and nest was cleaned up and more substrate (gravel) added. Alterations were made to the nest box even though the birds had not used it, but they might with

some home improvements. The side was cut off and gravel added inside as it was thought to be deep enough for an adequate nest scrape. It was also added around the open sides of the box to form a ramp for easy access by the parents but particularly for any young. Everyone concerned had carried out all jobs that needed to be done. The University Of Westminster had also installed a web cam; we all sat back and waited for the bird's return, if indeed they were going to return?



Dave Morrison after completing nest box alterations

We had expected to see signs of the birds by late March at the latest. The occasional sighting of the male was recorded but not of the female. When the peak period for egg laying by Peregrines had been and gone Dave Johnson decided to do some detective work. He wanted to make sure that there was still a pair, and if yes had they chosen somewhere else to nest this year. At more rugged locations birds may have several potential breeding sites, in urban areas these options are less. DJ having watched the birds thoroughly for more than a year, knowing the bird's favoured roost and cache sites was fairly confident of solving the mystery. Late one afternoon he phoned to say he had found them, the location looked to be perfect. Returning a few days later, he found that the birds had deserted the site. Again he managed to track the pair down; notifying the owners of the building the birds were now using and the importance of their new squatters. To check out the site he asked the permission of the owners of an office block adjacent if he could have access to a window opposite the nest. It was from here that he could observe without disturbing the sitting female. The birds were nesting in a coil of rope; the first time birds had been known to use that kind of material. Tragedy again struck on another visit the birds had gone and the nest material was hanging out of the recess, looking as if the bird had become entangled in it, and then losing the eggs.

How unlucky could these birds be?



Nest site amongst ropes

It was still early in the breeding season, with still enough time for the female to get back into condition before laying again, but where this time? The male was seen high above the park on 11th April, three days later the pair were back on the University of Westminster. The female then laid 3 eggs, we felt a little more comfortable knowing that the birds were back here, where they had been successful the year before. The birds must have liked our home improvements as they had chosen to use the nest box. The first egg hatched on the 1st June, the birds appeared on the BBC's Springwatch program, and the web cam could be accessed through BBC South-east web-site. Unfortunately the university were unable to have the images on their web site (a technical hitch) though their office staff was able to log in to the life story of the family. We sometimes popped in to see what was had been going on as the images there were sharper than on our own PC's. On one viewing the male Peregrine brought in a Budgerigar.



Two juveniles being rescued

Life on the ledge went along without a hitch; until the time for the first bird to fledge came. As the birds grew, their sexes became apparent, there were 2 males and a female. One male on the 11th July managed to take a short hop to the north side of the building, but returned to the nest ledge after a short period. It was not until two days later that this bird finally fledged at 8.20am. With the problems encountered with last year's fledglings, a watch was kept on the bird throughout day by Dave and a couple of volunteers and me. The only time we became a little anxious was when a group of workers having an afternoon break became aware of the bird. They approached the bird, taking pictures through a mobile phone. A volunteer located the offices building manager who was only too pleased to co-operate. The workers then kept well away, leaving the bird in peace and at 7.00pm he made it back to the nest ledge. One problem over or so we thought. The next day he overshot when trying to land on the top adjacent building. He dropped down behind a tall wall, from where we knew escape was extremely unlikely. Dave contacted the council and a key holder let us up on to the roof where the bird was quickly captured and placed on the top of the hut housing the lift shaft. The bird flew off strongly; during the day it moved from one building to another before returning to the nest where it had a good feed at 6.45pm. The next morning the other male fledged at 8.30am, after circling around he managed to land on a windowsill several floors

below the nest ledge. After regaining his composure he took off, this time coming to grief on a small balcony of a flat. Having met a tenant from the block of flats at the Peregrine watch point, we phoned to gain entry. We then worked out which flat with the balcony the bird had landed on, then knocked. A woman tentatively opened the door; we explained the situation to her. She said she had been about phone the RSPCA to come to her aid. We soon retrieved the bird, taking it back up on to the roof. It then promptly flew off to the top of a nearby building. It flew strongly, landing fairly well, giving us a little more confidence in the bird's ability. He had returned to the nest box by 12.30pm; two down and up with one to go. The female as normal was the last bird to fledge, due to the extra growth needed. She fledged early Saturday morning appearing settled on a nearby roof, looking up towards her brothers on the university. She then flew towards the next-door block of flats where she walked along the handrail. She sat on the corner watching the world go by below her. The flats occupiers had noticed her and were taking photos through the window. Catching their attention we gestured to them to move back. This they did before coming down to discuss the bird with us. Though looking settled she suddenly took off, disappearing behind a building and landing out of sight. Dave again, after a couple of hours with his innate senses found the bird above Marylebone High Street. She was moving away from the university. Then maybe hearing the calls of her brothers above the crowd, she flew back towards the building again attempting to land on a balcony but dropping down behind the retaining wall. As I was at work Dave tried to get into the flat, unfortunately there was nobody in. Would they be back today or were they away for the weekend or even longer? These were the thoughts going around in our heads. The problem was solved mid afternoon, we had miscounted the floor the bird had landed on. Dave had by looking down from an upstairs balcony worked out the correct location. I promptly drove down there and she was taken up to the roof, where she quickly rejoined her brothers.



Juvenile male



Juvenile female

That was the end of the dramas for another year. We could now watch the birds playing and developing their flying abilities from the watch point with lots of excited people. So many had heard the name Peregrine Falcon but had never seen one before. They soon became drawn to the birds beauty and power, returning daily. The family had moved away from the park by the end of August, though just before they left one bird was seen on the ground in the middle of the park. The young never quite got as far as the Tate Modern disappointing those who had followed the viewpoint there. They found a stop off point on route more to their liking.

Work was also carried out on one of the locations that the bird had failed at earlier in the year. Clearly the birds had seen this site as more favourable than the university; we will see what happens in 2006.

Check Gallery

