

Williamsburg Bird Club

May 25, 2022

Conducted via Zoom; invited by Ann Carpenter; presided by Patty Maloney

Attendance: 34

President's Remarks: Vice-President, Programs, Patty Maloney, substituting for President Nancy Barnhart, welcomed the attendees after which she introduced the speaker.

Program – Meagan Thomas: History of the Richmond Falcon Cam and the Rebound of Virginia's Peregrine Falcons

Meagan is a Watchable Wildlife Biologist with the Virginia Dept of Wildlife Resources who's responsible for educating and engaging the public with our state's vast diversity of wildlife. She's also the chapter adviser for the Historic Rivers Chapter of Master Naturalists. One of her favorite jobs is coordinating DWR's live streaming camera cams of which the Peregrine Falcon cam in Richmond is the most popular.

By the 1960s, there were no known breeding pairs of Peregrine Falcons east of the Mississippi in NA. The accumulation of DDT was the primary factor. Meagan described the history and ongoing successful recovery efforts of our earth's fastest animal reaching speeds of over 200 mph in its hunting dive, called the stoop

Meagan described peregrines as mostly monogamous with a high level of nest site fidelity which they fiercely defend. In Virginia, an average of 3-4 eggs are laid around March to April and they hatch in about 38 days. Peregrines feed primarily on medium sized birds.

Falco Peregrinus is divided into 19 subspecies and is found on every continent except Antarctica. Appropriately, the loose translation of peregrine means wanderer. There are 3 subspecies in NA with the American Peregrine Falcon being the one with which we are familiar. Historically they nested in Virginia on ledges on cliff faces in the mountains.

Peregrine Falcons were federally declared as endangered in 1969 by the American Species Conservation Act which preceded the current Endangered Species Act of 1973. DDT was banned in 1972 by the Environmental Protection Agency but, although DDT is no longer produced in the US, there are still large quantities of residues found across the country and DDT and its byproduct DDE are still widely found in animal tissues.

With the goal of establishing a self-sustaining population, the USFWS established the Eastern Peregrine Falcon Recovery Team comprised of federal, state and independent biologists. A captive breeding facility was established at Cornell in 1970, where the first chicks hatched in 1973. The breeding stock was comprised of a variety of indigenous and nonindigenous subspecies. As a result, today's Peregrine Falcons are a mixture of those many different subspecies. In 1974, the first peregrines raised in captivity were released via the technique used by falconers called hacking. Juveniles who are about 28-30 days old but are not yet fully capable of flight, are kept in a large enclosure and fed with minimal contact with humans. They are released 10-15 days later when their flight muscles and skills are more fully developed. Typically, the released birds remain around the hack site for about a couple of weeks while food continues to be provided until they disperse. All this effort culminated in 1980 when, for the first time since the 1950's, wild peregrine chicks hatched in eastern NA. A total of approximately 6,000 peregrines were released by 1999, whereupon the American subspecies was deemed recovered enough to be removed from the federal endangered species list.

In Virginia, the coastal plane was selected to release the first peregrines to minimize the predation of young birds by Great Horned Owls, which is more of a problem in their historic range in the mountains. Five young birds were hacked on Cobb Island in 1978. The first successful 'wild' nesting in Virginia took place on Assateague Island in 1982. Coastal hacking continued until 1985 with a total of 115 birds released and an over 85% successful dispersal rate. Since then, the coastal peregrine falcon population continues to grow, and annually has 25-30 pairs nesting on old hack towers, bridges, quarries and skyscrapers. Bridges are dangerous sites because there is minimal updraft to support first flights and the youngsters can end up in the water and drown.

The first step to get peregrines reestablished in the mountains started in 1985. Since 2000, peregrines have been hacked annually in the mountains. Many of them were ones that had hatched in the wild in nests on bridges, and were relocated to give them a better chance of survival. In 2021, a new record of 5 established pairs was observed. It is a challenge to monitor them in the mountains so there may be more.

Meagan credited W&M's Center for Conservation Biology for the enormous role they've played in the recovery program. They monitor and band the peregrines in the eastern portion of the state, whereas DWR mostly monitors and bands those in the western part of the state.

Starting in 2000, peregrines were hacked in Richmond and a pair established a nesting site in 2003. Although hacking in Richmond stopped in 2002, peregrines have continued to nest in Richmond. For the last several years, the falcons have been nesting on the 21st story of the west tower of the Riverfront Plaza Building which is near the James River. DWR set up the Richmond Falcon Cam that provides livestream coverage of the nest and family dynamics, complete with sound, from March to July. Besides being entertaining, the Falcon Cam provides a lot of info for research purposes, such as prey tracking, chick rearing, family lineage. Because most of the falcons over the years on Falcon Cam have been banded, they are recognized as individuals with known family lineage. Meagan shared an outline of a who's who, territorial disputes, family drama and their breeding success. One juvenile was spotted in New Jersey barely 2 months after having fledged! The current female parent had hatched in Delaware and the male hatched in Yorktown. They raised 4 chicks in 2021 and are raising another clutch of four this year. The sex of the chick is determined when banded by the size of the leg band with which they are fitted. The females have bigger legs. Premature fledging was a frequent problem in the past, with one youngster ending perched on a jersey barrier in the middle of I-95. So, now, after the chicks are banded, they are placed back in the nest box around which a roomy cage is placed. The parents continue to feed them through the cage bars. When the juveniles are about 45 days old, the cage door is opened by remote control and the juveniles leave on their own accord. Monitoring continues after they leave because they often have difficulty mastering landing on ledges during the first two days and occasionally require rescuing. They usually remain in the area for a couple of weeks, but then begin dispersing.

Meagan's enthusiasm about the peregrine falcons was palpable, as well as her delight in sharing the baby videos and photos.

Announcements:

Next Meeting: Patty announced that the next membership meeting will be an outdoor event on Wednesday, June 15th and 6:30 pm at the covered pavilion at Chickahominy Riverfront Park. This will be an informal social event featuring refreshments and no speaker. The pavilion is reserved until 8 pm.

Field Trips: Patty related that field trip coordinator George Martin had reported that 21 people attended the May 21st trip to Cranston Mill Pond led by Alex Minarik. Forty-four species were observed with good looks at Blue Grossbeak, Summer Tanager, Eastern Kingbird, Bald Eagle and an active Ruby-throated Hummingbird nest. Next field trip will be in September.

Bird Walks: Patty reported that the monthly bird walk at New Quarter Park led by Scott Hemler would be Saturday, May 28 at 8:00 am. Scott reported that he'd noticed that NQP's website now states that they want participants to register 2 days prior to the walk. Scott could not find a place for registration on the site. So, he will arrive a little early on Saturday and check-in at the office to straighten things out.

The Flyer: Patty announced that newsletter editor, VP Mary Ellen Hodges, has requested that submissions for the next edition be sent to her by May 27th. Photos taken at the May 28th bird walk may be sent to her by May 29. Cathy Flanagan reported that the winners of *The Flyer* trivia game were Deborah Humphries and Daphne Goodridge. Two winners were selected because answers were sent to two different emails. Cathy requested that folks submit their answers to the email listed in *The Flyer*.

Patty adjourned the meeting at 8:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
May 31, 2022