

Peregrine Falcon



The Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) subspecies *anatum*, breeds throughout continental North America from Alaska to Greenland, and down to Northern Mexico. Generally, and depending on latitude, Peregrines can be found in Quebec between February and November. As winter settles in, most individuals migrate south towards the Eastern coast of the United States, Central America or South America, following the massive migration movements of other bird species they prey on. However, a number of individuals remain in Quebec year round (mostly in large cities in the south of the province) depending on prey availability and winter temperatures.

How to recognize this raptor?

Peregrine Falcons have a dark hood and wide “moustaches” on either side of their head. Their pale underside bears variable amounts and thickness of black spots and stripes. Adults display blue-grey feathers on their back and on the upper side of their wings, whilst these appear brownish in immature individuals. In flight the pointed wings and narrow tail typical of falcons are conspicuous features.

Peregrines are back in various regions of Quebec and have been seen in Estrie and Eastern Monteregie. The size of a crow, this species cannot be mistaken with any other when it folds its wings to dive on a bird at over 200 km/hr literally pounding it in flight.

Lord of the cliffs and master of the air

In its natural habitat, the Peregrine Falcon tends to establish its nest on cliffs or rocky outcrops. It does not build a nest as such, choosing instead to settle directly onto natural ledges or in shallow cavities, on soil or gravel. The nest itself is often located on the upper half or upper tier of the cliff face. The presence of open habitats in the vicinity of the nesting site is frequent, seeing as peregrines make the most of these areas to hunt their preys, i.e. birds such as ducks, shorebirds, Red-winged Blackbirds, etc, which are caught in flight. The Peregrine Falcon can also adapt fairly easily to urban sites, choosing for instance to nest onto the structure of bridges or high buildings, especially if a watercourse or waterbody can be found nearby.



Adult Peregrine falcon --- Photo © www.hawkquest.com

Life on the edge

The breeding season begins as soon as Peregrines are back on Quebec territory and it can last up until early June depending on latitudes. The incubation period for the 3 to 4 eggs of each clutch can last from 28 to 35 days. Once hatched, falcon chicks are covered in down that will soon develop into juvenile plumage. Young falcons are ready for their first flight after 35 to 40 days in the nest. They will still depend on their parents for another five to six weeks. Adults show a high fidelity to their nesting sites and can even reuse the same nesting spot over a number of decades. If their nest is already occupied, they will often settle in the region, though at a good distance from the breeding couple already established.

A species at risk

From the late 1940s, the use of organochloride pesticides such as DDT was aimed at exterminating insects and parasites thought of as crop pests. Treatment with these products had severe consequences on the populations of several untargeted animal species. The Peregrine Falcon was one of the most infamous victims of these pesticides. Of the three Peregrine subspecies occurring in Canada, the *anatum* subspecies was the most severely affected and, by the early 1970s, all known breeding sites in southern Quebec had been deserted.



FaAdult Peregrine Falcon--- © Steve Faccio, nwi.org

Steve Faccio

In these circumstances, a program was established throughout Canada in 1976 to counter the drastic decline experienced by the Peregrine Falcon. The reintroduction program was successful and the recovery of the *anatum* subspecies both in Quebec and Canada was so encouraging that its Canadian status progressed from “Endangered” to “Threatened” and eventually to “Special Concern” in 2007. However, and despite significant improvements, the Peregrine falcon remains a species at risk.



Faucon pèlerin --- Photo © Emily Eaton, birdwatchersdigest.com

A time for vigilance

Now banned in Canada and in the United States, organochloride pesticides are still used in some of the countries where peregrines overwinter. Traces of these products continue to be detected in the birds' tissues, though at levels that do not appear to significantly affect the species' breeding rate and success. Other pesticides authorized and regularly used in Canada raise concerns, for their impacts on falcons and other non-targeted species are yet unknown.

Human disturbances occurring on or near breeding sites (e.g. walking, hiking, rock-climbing, hang gliding) represent genuine threats. They can result -and indeed have done so in the past- in adult Peregrines abandoning their nest, thus interrupting incubation and preventing egg hatching or leading to the death of their young. Other threats affecting this species are egg collecting and the capture of chicks for falconry (both types of collection being forbidden in Quebec and in most Canadian Provinces).

How you can help

As a rule of thumb, one must avoid approaching within 250 meters of the Peregrine's nesting site during breeding season. It is important to respect minimum distances, being for the purpose of observing the species or for other activities such as hiking. Indeed, consequences on the breeding success of Peregrine Falcons are proportional to the level and frequency of disturbance inflicted. Moreover, landowners should ideally refrain from undertaking any work (such as forestry activities) during the breeding season, which can extend from early March to late July.

Rock climbing activities should also be interrupted from early March to late July on those cliffs where Peregrine Falcons are known to breed or where they are most likely to do so. The same restrictions apply for hang glider take off areas located above breeding sites.

Of course, the conservation of wetlands and other open habitats located below or in the vicinity of nesting sites is essential for the species' continual breeding success. These habitats represent the raptor's main hunting areas. For more information on existing measures of protection towards Peregrine Falcon's habitat or to find out about conservation tools available to landowners for the preservation of natural habitats in perpetuity, please get in touch with your local conservation organization or contact Appalachian Corridor: info@corridorappalachien.ca or (450) 297-1145.

Sources

- Comité de rétablissement du faucon pèlerin au Québec. 2002. *Plan d'action pour le rétablissement du faucon pèlerin anatum* (Falco peregrinus anatum) au Québec. Société de la faune et des parcs du Québec, 28 p.
- COSEPAC. 2007. *Évaluation et rapport de situation du COSEPAC sur le faucon pèlerin* (Falco peregrinus) de la sous-espèce pealei (F. peregrinus pealei) et anatum/tundrius (F. peregrinus anatum/tundrius) au Canada – Mise à jour. Comité sur la situation des espèces en péril au Canada, Environnement Canada. Ottawa. viii + 55p. www.registrelep.gc.ca/Status/Status_f.cfm

Appalachian Corridor is a conservation organization with a mission to implement, in collaboration with Nature Conservancy Quebec and local conservation organizations, a transborder conservation strategy for the protection of a natural corridor extending from the Green Mountains of Vermont to Mount Orford, passing through the Sutton Mountains in the Eastern Townships. Partners supporting the global vision put forward by Appalachian Corridor include: Mount Echo Conservation Association, Association pour la conservation de la nature de Stukely-Sud, Ruiter Valley Land Trust, Parc d'environnement naturel de Sutton, Mount Pinnacle Land Trust, Alderbrooke Marsh Land Trust, Memphremagog Wetlands foundation, Brome Lake Land Foundation, Société de conservation du corridor naturel de la rivière au Saumon, Conservation des vallons de la Serpentine, Société de protection foncière du lac Montjoie, Les Sentiers de l'Estrie, Conservation Espace Nature Shefford and Massawippi Conservation Trust.
