

THE BREEDING AND RELEASE OF PEREGRINES IN WEST GERMANY

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INTRODUCTION

In summer 1982 a pair of Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) nested in a historical nest site on a cliff in the eastern part of Germany. They laid two eggs, both hatched and the two young, a falcon and a tiercel, fledged. This was the first time in nearly 20 years that Peregrines raised their young in this part of Germany. The breeding pair, a three-year old female and a two-year-old male, were ringed with special rings which showed that these birds had been bred in captivity and released in the wild. It also showed that our activities to help this threatened species to survive in the wild were successful, despite the doubts and strong opposition voiced by many ornithologists and nature conservationists. We were satisfied to be able to demonstrate this promising result only four years after our release programme began with the release of only three young in 1978.

THE WILD POPULATION

The situation of the Peregrine in Germany, as in other parts of Europe and North America, is bad. There now exists only a small remnant population in southern Germany of not more than 50 breeding pairs. North of the River Main there used to be a dense breeding population, but no Peregrines were left after the great crash which occurred between the early 1950s and late 1960s.

Many different reasons accounted for this decline, which resulted in total extinction in many areas. No doubt, as in other parts of the world, the main reasons were the use of pesticides, especially DDT, and the poisoning of our environment with substances like PCBs. Nest robberies of young falcons and eggs for illegal trade or falconry could have led to the loss of the small remnant population; however, this was nearly completely stopped by special organizations set up for the protection of the species. Members of these organizations were very effective in guarding the remaining nests in southern Germany each year during the breeding season, but even with this protection the rate of young falcons fledging was very low and for the following 12 years not more than 20 young left the nests. In the last five years there seems to have been a promising tendency for a higher fledging success of young falcons. Even in the east of our country, under a different government where falconry was forbidden (with the Peregrine Falcon),

Falcon), not a single breeding pair survived, so falconry was clearly not the main reason for decline.

At present the situation in Germany is as follows: there are no breeding pairs left in eastern and northern Germany, including the entire tree-nesting population; and so far there has been no sign of repopulation of these areas from the south. This of course could change if the tendency of increased production continues from the southern remnant populations.

CAPTIVE BREEDING

For many years falconers in Germany have tried to breed Peregrines in captivity with no success. However, in 1974 we bred the first Peregrines in Berlin. Since then we have raised a total of 202 young. Dr Trommer in Bavaria, who is co-operating closely with us, has bred 58 Peregrines during the same period. Nowadays we proudly state that we are able to breed as many Peregrines as we like; it is just a question of time and money.

To begin with we had to deal with many difficulties. The most serious was the lack of a suitable breeding stock. Of course the best and most promising method would have been to get birds from the wild, but this was not possible. Some nature conservationists and ornithologists were strongly opposed to our plans to breed the Peregrine for release and even tried to have these activities forbidden. It was not even possible to get injured or sick birds from the wild, except for one individual: in 1979 the Berlin Breeding Project received one female suffering from a heavy parasitic infection. This falcon was treated in Berlin, survived, and was kept in our project; she produced six young last year, of which all have been released. Otherwise the only source for breeding birds was the falconers. Consequently we had to start with a very small breeding stock, mainly of imprinted Peregrines, some even of southern origin (*Falco peregrinus brookei*). It has been only with great difficulty that we have built up a safe breeding stock of *F. p. peregrinus* for release purposes. At first because we were working with imprinted birds, we had to begin by using artificial insemination. We still have to practice this with some of the falcons, even though the number of normally reproducing birds is slowly increasing. Besides A.I. we used the methods of double clutching and egg pulling to increase the numbers of eggs. We still have difficulties with artificial incubation, and hatching rates are not absolutely satisfactory. We found that hatching rates differed between females. In very old females (over 13 years) hatching was very poor even though they had a high percentage of fertile eggs. In order to overcome these problems we now treat every egg individually, which has improved hatching success. We have had very few problems raising falcon chicks.

RELEASES

In 1977 we started our first experimental releases from a building in the city of West Berlin. One year later the release programme in Hessen, in West Germany, was established. Together with Dr Trommer, whose activities have been mainly in Bavaria, we have released 101 Peregrines. We have used the hacking method from buildings (35), traditional former cliff nest sites (36) and artificial tree nests (8). We have also carried out releases by fostering to Peregrines (14), cross-fostering to Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) (2) and cross-fostering to Goshawks (*Accipiter gentilis*) (6). We have knowledge of 15 losses (accidents with cars,

wires, killed by wild Goshawks, disease). Releasing from tree nests has included fostering to Goshawks, which we believe is perhaps a successful approach to building up a new tree-nesting population through the imprinting of these young falcons on tree nests.

Since we began to release Peregrines bred in captivity we have had quite a number of promising reports. Peregrines have been observed in the surrounding areas for the first time in many years. We have reports from east Germany from the Harz mountains. On some of these occasions it has been possible to identify the falcons as our releases from the rings they were wearing. In 1982 we had the following results: the above-mentioned breeding pair in the Harz (GDR) raising two young, and another pair observed at a former nesting site not far from the first. The tiercel was a one-year-old and the female was in adult plumage. The tiercel was one of our releases as the rings showed; the female has not yet been identified. There is a possibility of breeding next year.

In Hessen, not far from our release areas, a pair of Peregrines took over a cliff, the female in juvenile, the tiercel in adult plumage. Both were from our releases.

Finally, a pair of Peregrines was found nesting on a lighthouse in the North Sea. The female wore jesses (a lost hunting bird) and the male was ringed; he was a bird released from an artificial tree nest in Berlin in 1980. This year they had three eggs which did not hatch, and which were highly contaminated with pesticides. They were subsequently given a young tiercel from our breeding project which they raised and fledged.

If we are lucky next year (1983) we shall have in the wild at least four breeding pairs where both, or at least one, of the pair was bred in captivity and released to the wild.