

Peregrine Falcon

This text is from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Up in the sky, look: It's a bird. It's a plane. It's Superman! No, we were right the first time. Definitely a bird, and most would agree it's a super bird. Meet the peregrine falcon.

If you are impressed by animal records, you might already know about this falcon. When diving toward prey from great heights, this falcon attains tremendous speeds. Its combination of long, relatively narrow, pointed wings, streamlined shape, and strong chest muscles allow the bird to fly faster than any other bird. Just how fast is a subject of some debate. Technically speaking, the peregrine holds the record for fastest speed while diving, assisted by gravity. Other birds are recognized for being the fastest flying bird in level flight, or for completing long migratory flights faster than other species. Maximum speeds recorded range from 124 to 242 miles an hour.

The 242 mph speed was recorded in 2005, when a falconer measured the speed of his pet falcon in an experiment.

Whether they're the fastest animals on the planet or not, most people are thrilled to see them in the wild. The subspecies nesting in the continental United States was nearly extirpated by the eggshell-thinning effects of the pesticide DDT about 60 years ago, and the bird landed on the Endangered Species List in 1970. The nationwide ban of DDT in 1973, coupled with a very focused and passionate reintroduction effort, resulted in one of the most successful recoveries in the history of the Endangered Species Act. In 1999, the peregrine falcon was removed from the list, and populations have continued to increase slowly since that time.

Equally at home nesting and feeding in rural cliffs and canyons or in urban habitats with tall buildings and bridges, the handsome falcons are welcome sights to bird watchers and conservationists alike.



a peregrine falcon

Peregrine Falcon Data

- Size and color - 15 to 21 inches long, with a 40-inch wingspan. Peregrine falcons are the size of a crow, with a dark blue to slate gray back, white throat, black facial markings, and spotted or barred belly. They have long, pointed wings and rapid wingbeats.
- Range - Historically, they were most common in parts of the Appalachian Mountains and nearby valleys from New England south to Georgia, the upper Mississippi River Valley, and the Rocky Mountains. Peregrines also inhabited the Pacific Coast from Mexico north to Alaska and in the Arctic Tundra. Most Peregrines from northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland migrate in the fall to Central and South America, stopping at U.S. coastlines along the way to hunt for shorebirds, wading birds, waterfowl, and other birds. Peregrines that breed south of Canada migrate lesser distances, or not at all.
- Diet - Primarily birds, including songbirds, shorebirds, ducks, and - in urban areas - starlings and pigeons
- U.S. habitat - Mountain ranges, river valleys, coastlines, wetlands and open areas, and urban areas

See This Bird!

Although not considered common in any location, this falcon breeds in about 40 states and is reported by birders and biologists from every state annually. There are several national wildlife refuges where you can look for nesting, resting, migrating, or wintering peregrines.

- Cape Meares National Wildlife Refuge - A pair of peregrine falcons has nested on the refuge since 1987. A wildlife viewing deck at Cape Meares State Scenic Viewpoint offers visitors a glimpse into the eyrie, or nest site, of the falcon pair from early April through July.
- Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge - Look for falcons in the winter in search of waterfowl and other bird prey.
- Cape May National Wildlife Refuge - One of the best places to see peregrines during fall migration, with peak numbers appearing during late September and early October.

[. . .]