

by Skip Ambrose and
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A Partnership for Peregrines



A peregrine falcon and her nestlings
USFWS photo

In 1955, the first cadet class of the U.S. Air Force Academy chose the falcon as the mascot of the Cadet Wing. The cadets felt the falcon, symbolizing speed, agility, and power, best symbolized the Air Force. This decision began an association between the Air Force and the falcon that continues today. In fact, the F-16, currently one of the Air Force's top fighter aircraft, is nicknamed "The Fighting Falcon."

Beginning in the 1950s, another falcon, the peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*), found itself defenseless against the effects of pollution. By 1973, reproductive failure caused by the pesticide DDT reduced the American peregrine falcon (*F. p. anatum*) to the point that the Fish and Wildlife Service added it to the list of endangered species. After the use of DDT was restricted in the U.S. and restoration programs (such as nest site protection and reintroductions of captive-propagated birds) began, the species moved forward on its long road back to a secure status.

Alaska is the only state where all three North American subspecies of the

peregrine falcon—American, Arctic (*F. p. tundrius*), and Peale's (*F. p. pealei*)—nest. From a military perspective, Alaska is strategically located near the polar routes between Europe, Russia, and North America. Thus, Alaska is pivotal to both the falcon and the Air Force.

Air Force training activities in Alaska increased significantly in the early 1990s. Much of this training involves very low-level and high-speed flights, a combination with the potential to disturb many wildlife species, including nesting falcons. Due in part to its special connection with falcons, the Air Force has worked with the Service since the early 1980s to minimize or eliminate impacts

The U.S. Air Force's F-16 aircraft is nicknamed the "Fighting Falcon."
U.S. Air Force photo



of Air Force activities on the American peregrine falcon in Alaska.

Through the interagency consultation process outlined in section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Air Force and the Service identified major peregrine nesting areas in proposed Air Force training locations. The Air Force agreed to a protective "no-fly" zone of 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) horizontal distance and 2,000 feet (610 meters) above nest level in these dense nesting areas. Additionally, the Air Force is monitoring several nearby peregrine populations that fall outside the protected areas. This monitoring effort, which has continued since 1995, shows that the protective zones appear to provide adequate protection in the densest nesting areas and that the incidental loss of nestlings outside these zones is below the levels originally anticipated.

Most people assume it is the responsibility of the Service to protect and restore listed species; however, the ESA extends this mandate to *all* federal agencies. The Air Force has accepted its responsibilities under the law and contributed significantly to the recovery of peregrine falcons in Alaska.

In addition to the assessment of impacts of low-level aircraft and sonic booms on nesting falcons, the peregrine survey effort funded by the Air Force in Alaska is one of the largest and most successful in North America. During the past 5 years, over 125 peregrine nest sites have been located annually and checked for breeding success and productivity. Another study, this one using the latest in satellite transmitter technology, provided heretofore unknown information about the migration routes and wintering areas of peregrine falcons. Biologists in Alaska, funded by the Air Force and working in conjunction with biologists in Greenland funded by the U. S. Army, deployed the first satellite transmitters small enough to be carried aloft by peregrine falcons.

By 1999, North American peregrines had recovered to the point that the Service removed them from the list of

threatened and endangered species. The knowledge gained by the Air Force research projects was important in the recovery process, and will continue to be valuable to the Air Force as it assists the Service in planning and implementing a 5-year post-delisting monitoring plan for the American peregrine falcon.

In addition, the peregrine remains on the Boreal (Alaska) Partners in Flight/Audubon Watchlist as a species of management concern. Peregrine habitat management will also be incorporated into Air Force integrated natural resource management plans, in collaboration with the Department of Defense's Partners in Flight program.

Rather than making a minimal effort to comply with the law, the Air Force actively pursued programs to help recover the American peregrine falcon. Perhaps the long association and connection between the Air Force and its mascot, the falcon, provided the impetus for this effort. And maybe the Air Force in Alaska simply wanted to do the right thing.

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The first peregrine falcon ever fitted with a satellite telemetry unit.

Photo by Skip Ambrose/USFWS