

THREE REMARKABLE OBSERVATIONS
OF PEREGRINE FALCON AT PLUM ISLAND

During late August and early September 1981, one or more Peregrine Falcons were very active about Plum Island. Over Labor Day Weekend, many birders were treated to nice looks at an immature Peregrine in the general vicinity of Stage Island Pool and Cross Farm Hill. Observers saw this bird in a variety of circumstances not unusual for a Peregrine: e.g., sitting perched in a tree overlooking Stage Island Pool, flying along the refuge road, and playing aerial chase with Northern Harriers. In addition, three parties of observers were privileged to witness the remarkable incidents described in the following field notes.

Chris Floyd

The Taking of a Woodchuck. At about 4 p.m. on August 29, 1981, as we were driving north past the Stage Island parking lot on Plum Island, we spotted a Peregrine Falcon over the marshy area between us and Cross Farm Hill (ahead and to the left of us). The bird was flying low from our left to our right on a line that intersected the road about fifty yards ahead of us. As the bird approached the road, it disappeared from our view behind a line of shrubs and small trees to the left of the road. Expecting to see the bird reappear ahead of us in a few seconds, we continued up the road. When the bird came into our view again, about five or ten seconds later than we expected, it was barely managing to lift off the ground with an animal in its talons. By the animal's brownish coloration, plump shape, furry tail, and overall length comparable to the falcon's, we could tell that it was a woodchuck, though perhaps not full-grown. It showed no sign of life. We could see that the falcon was an immature by the brown color of its upperparts and the dark streaking of its breast.

The labored manner of the falcon's flight was striking. Its wing strokes were very pronounced - high on the upstroke and deep on the downstroke. The flight feathers of its wings and tail seemed spread to maximum extent. The tilting of its wing was evident on every stroke. The cadence of its wingbeats gave the visual impression of a Peregrine flying in slow motion.

By the time the falcon reached the road, it had gained an altitude of about ten feet and its flight had become less labored. At this point it turned and began flying away from us along the road. As it repositioned its grasp on the woodchuck, it lost some altitude but then quickly regained it. Then it turned off to the right of the road and again disappeared from our view. We stopped at the crest of the road opposite Cross Farm Hill and scanned for the bird but did not see it again.

Glenn d'Entremont and Dave Brown
(as related to Chris Floyd)

The Taking of a Snowy Egret. At about 11:30 a.m. on September 3, 1981, while I was observing some Buff-breasted Sandpipers at "Plumbush," a Peregrine Falcon appeared directly over me at a height of no more than fifty feet. As the bird headed southeastward toward the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, I was able to get a reasonably good look at it through my binoculars (7x50). It appeared to be a large immature. Its large dark sideburns were very evident.

The Peregrine had flown about two hundred feet away from me when it quickly and with little effort swooped (not stooped) down upon a Black-crowned Night Heron standing in the marsh. The heron saw the attack coming and crouched just in time to elude the falcon's lowered talons. The falcon immediately regained a height of ten feet and attacked the heron again, but again missed. It then resumed its flight toward the refuge.

The Peregrine was flying in a steady line at a height of about fifty feet when, at a distance about a half mile away from me, a flock of about ten to fifteen Snowy Egrets flew up beneath it. The Peregrine flew down into the center of the flock of egrets, which were scattering in various directions, and emerged with one in its talons. The capture was made at a height of about twenty or twenty-five feet. With the egret in its grasp, the Peregrine flew around in two or three fairly tight circles and landed in the marsh very close to the location of the capture. I did not see the bird after this.

Clark Ewer

Predatory Play. On September 6, 1981, in the early afternoon, a Peregrine Falcon was observed by a number of people at the South Impoundment of Hellcat Swamp on Plum Island. It was a young bird with heavy dark breast streaking. A dark brown (?) band was evident on its left leg; no Fish and Wildlife Service band could be seen. When I first noticed the bird, it was perched on a low pile of dry vegetation near the north end of the impoundment mud flats. After a few minutes, it took flight and flew very low (one or two feet above the mud flat) toward the middle of the impoundment. Its flight was leisurely in manner. After flying a couple of hundred yards, it pounced upon a large grayish feather (probably a gull feather) attached at its base to some debris (possibly the remains of the fleshy part of a bird's wing). For the next minute or two, it repeatedly released the feather from its talons, tossed it away and pounced on it again. Then its attention was taken by a gnarled, dried-out plant root that it attacked much as it had the feather. With its wings held partly open, it hopped about with the root in its talons, picked at it with its bill, tossed it away, and recaptured it. It played with the root much as a cat would play with a mouse. The bird continued this activity for a few minutes and then flew away to the south.

George W. Gove

HOW TO REPORT PEREGRINE SIGHTINGS

In order to prevent the loss of valuable Peregrine Falcon sighting information, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has established their Wildlife Management office in Concord as the prime repository for all Peregrine sighting reports in New England.

Any Peregrine sighting should be reported to:

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Mr. Rene M. Bollengier, Jr.
P.O. Box 1518
Concord, New Hampshire 03301
Telephone 603-225-9621

The basic information that should be obtained and passed on is: name of individual making the sighting and means (address and telephone number) of contacting that individual, date, and location of sighting. It is hoped that a pattern will emerge that will identify general localities of Peregrine use.

There have been two cliff nesting pairs of Peregrines in New England during the past two years. Some important sighting information may have been missed because it was passed on to individuals that were not aware of its value. Hopefully this can be avoided in the future. Information received will be consolidated annually by the Concord office, arranged in report form, and made available to cooperating agencies.

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