

## PEREGRINE DAY—CLOSE ENOUGH

by Peter Trull

Most birders have special days, whether it is the date of a predictable event like the return of a favorite species from wintering or breeding grounds or perhaps the anniversary of a life bird or a rarity. Each year I spend as much time as I can during the first week of October watching Peregrines as they migrate along Chatham's eastern shore. Inevitably these beautiful falcons stop at Monomoy Island where food abounds in the form of migrating shorebirds. Through the years October 8 stands out—Peregrine Day. In 1989, on October 7 (close enough), an event took place on the south tip of North Monomoy Island, Chatham, that I believe is worth sharing.

Friend Carol Dennis and I had been on the island for about an hour and had seen two Peregrines moving over the marsh and tidal flats, mildly terrorizing the Black-bellies and Sanderlings that feed by the hundreds out on "Godwit Bar." We decided to head for the flat open expanse of the south tip of the north island, where Peregrines habitually sit down on the white sand. Using my pal Blair Nikula's boat, we whisked down the east beach into the cut and threw out the anchor. Just as we stepped out on the sand, Carol yelled and pointed behind us in the cut. There, a hundred feet away, was a Red-breasted Merganser floating belly up, feet flailing, head submerged. Holding onto the breast of this fair-sized duck was a juvenile Peregrine Falcon, flapping furiously, leg outstretched, trying to lift the duck.

Repeatedly, the falcon would take off, make a tight circle around the still alive but drowning duck, swoop, grasp, jerk forward, and let go. I figured the falcon had broken the merg's neck; otherwise the fish-eating diver would have righted itself. Carol observed the initial flash and splash, but we never saw the contact until the duck was in the water. Finally, the young falcon landed just down the beach and watched the still kicking duck float by. My next move might annoy some Darwinists, but I could not resist. I yelled something to the waiting Peregrine and jumped in the boat. I grabbed the now dead duck and tossed it on the shore.

As we sat waiting for a response, a flock of shorebirds whistled by at Mach 10. "Another 'Grin," we said in unison. A second Peregrine was moving straight by, into the westerly breeze. I saw the bird look over its shoulder, drop a wing, fan its tail, and instantly, it was hanging on the breeze just over our heads and keying on the dead duck that lay on the beach slope sixty feet away. It seemed interested.

The first Peregrine began to walk in our direction, shuffling toward its prey. When it came to the shell of a horseshoe crab, the undignified youngster

climbed on top of it, spread its wings, and started to feed. "Wrong bump, you turkey; the duck's over here," I whispered. Meanwhile, the second Peregrine was hanging above us, circling eight feet over our heads, drifting by—too close for binoculars. To these birds, which may have left Greenland a week or so earlier and may have had no experience with humans before this day, we were just figures on the landscape, the same as caribou or seals.

Finally, the first falcon had moved into position atop its prey and began to pluck feathers from the duck's breast—a steady stream of plumage was blown along the sand. It was not long before Peregrine Two landed within four feet of its feeding kin. Carol and I looked at each other. What now? We sat watching through knee-braced binoculars.

The feeding bird paid no heed to its approaching rival. Peregrine Two casually inched toward Peregrine One until the two identical juveniles stood shoulder to shoulder. Suddenly, the intruder raised its wings, the plumage of both birds ruffled, hackles were raised, and the two young falcons stood erect. They locked talons and—kicking, pecking, and calling "ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ka"—rolled down the slope of the intertidal zone. The challenger backed off, and Peregrine One climbed atop the duck to resume feeding. Carol and I watched variations of this behavior, which was repeated about six times over a thirty-minute period.

The feeding bird stood about twenty-five feet from our anchor, which was gradually disappearing beneath the incoming tide. Carol crouched low and moved slowly toward the anchor—and directly toward the birds. Both falcons eyed her every move. I yelled to her in a loud whisper, "Pull the anchor up and sit down; sit down!" The feeding Peregrine watched but never stopped gulping down beakfuls. I scooted over on my butt until we were too close to scope; we had to finish them off with binoculars.

By this time a third juvenile had landed a hundred feet down the beach and was just standing there, as Peregrines do. Peregrine Two now made a different approach. Instead of coming up the beach from below, it moved to the uphill side of the feeding bird and inched closer and closer. Its next move blew us away! Almost lying on its side, with outstretched wings nearly touching above its head, the challenger stretched out one long leg with its long Peregrine toes, grasped the merganser's side, and dragged the duck three feet up the beach while the feasting bird, Peregrine One, stood atop its booty, using its wings to balance against the jerking motion. This direct move netted the challenger nothing. So the determined bird resorted to another tactic. It let go of the duck, sidled up to the carcass, and began to feed on it. Bird One was unperturbed, at least for fifteen or twenty seconds. But then the raised-hackles-and-roll-down-the-beach routine was repeated once again. Nonetheless, for a brief time, there they were—two juvenile Peregrines feeding on the same kill! Were they



*Juvenile Peregrine Falcon Feeding on Red-breasted Merganser.*  
*October 7, 1989. North Monomoy Island. Photo by David Houghton.*

siblings? I have no answers, no explanations.

There were now four juvenile Peregrines in view at once. We had hardly moved for over two hours, awestruck by this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Ah, Monomoy....

As Carol and I sat watching Peregrine One finish off the duck, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service boat came into view, moving through the cut, heading toward us. In sign language I signaled for the captain, Dave Houghton, to approach slowly and feast his eyes. Dave and two companions landed, were soon beside us, and—as I pointed to four standing Peregrines—speechless. Luckily, Dave had his camera and was able to take some photos of the feeding bird, now completely at ease, finishing up, unchallenged, its midday meal of Red-breasted Merganser.

**PETER TRULL** is Director of Education at the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History. A veteran birder, naturalist, and teacher, Peter was for ten years tern warden for Massachusetts Audubon Society and has published articles in *Bird Observer* and *The Cape Naturalist*. Currently, he is completing a book, a general field guide to the one hundred and forty most common birds of Cape Cod and the Islands. Peter is also widely known to Cape Cod radio listeners for his program "The Birdwatcher's Report," a regular morning feature (8:45 A.M.) of station WFCC in Chatham.