

Peregrine falcons

an advice note about nesting on buildings in London

Peregrines – back from the brink

The peregrine is our largest resident falcon in the UK, and is traditionally associated with rugged mountains and steep sea cliffs. However, this versatile raptor has recently begun to colonise urban environments, including London, where it is using tall buildings and other structures as substitutes for its traditional crag and cliff-ledge nesting sites. Urban areas also provide a plentiful supply of prey species, pigeons and other medium sized birds ranging from starlings to black-headed gulls. In fact, the British peregrine population has staged an amazing comeback after a period of severe decline during the last century. The recovery of the peregrine population is viewed as a remarkable conservation success story. It is no longer necessary to go to former traditional habitats to see this remarkable bird.

Peregrines in London

Peregrines have been seen occasionally in and around London for many years, but until recently most sightings were of the occasional individual hunting over the Thames marshes or London reservoirs during the winter months. However, by the mid 1990's individual birds began to spend the summers in London, and by the late 1990's peregrines were a regular, albeit rare, sight above the skies of the capital. The steady increase in sightings of peregrines in London culminated with suspected breeding in 2000 and confirmed breeding in 2001. Peregrines are now seen regularly at prime roost sites including the Millennium Dome, Battersea Power Station and the Tate Modern. Hunting peregrines can be seen almost anywhere, including over Trafalgar Square, but are most frequently seen along the Thames and over the large reservoir complexes in the Lee Valley and in south-west London.

Urban nest sites

As peregrines increasingly colonise cities such as London, office buildings, tower blocks and other tall landmarks within the capital may be used for nesting and roosting sites. Urban peregrines will exploit a range of nooks, crannies and ledges on buildings and will occasionally nest in abandoned crow's nests on electricity pylons or similar structures. If a pair of peregrines are present around a tall building or structure during the breeding season (March-July), building managers, maintenance contractors, and others with access to the external areas of tall buildings, should be aware of the possibility of a nest-site being occupied.

Sometimes, despite a healthy food supply, peregrines may not breed for some years. Where an occupied territory is clearly present around a group of buildings, an artificial nest site in the form of a large nest box containing a layer of soft substrate can be provided to encourage the birds to start nesting. These nest boxes can be very successful in enticing peregrines to nest at a new site. However, the location of a nest-box should be carefully considered as the peregrine is a specially protected bird.

The provision of a peregrine nest-box, or specially designed ledge or recess to provide a safe platform for a nest, could also be included as part of the design of new tall buildings and structures in London and other urban centres.

Nesting peregrines and the law

Where a breeding pair of peregrines are present on a building, it is important that simple precautionary measures are followed so that the legal protection afforded to nesting peregrines under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) is not infringed accidentally.

It is an offence to destroy any egg or nest of any wild bird; but for certain species, including the peregrine, it is also an offence to disturb the nest site, including during the building process, until after the young have fledged. Therefore, when installing a nest box on a building, it is important to choose a location where access will not be required, even for routine maintenance from late March until the end of July. Routine maintenance can be carried out outside this period. If for some unforeseen emergency access becomes a necessity it is important that English Nature is contacted before any work is carried out, as peregrines may only be disturbed under a special licence issued by English Nature.

If birds show signs of nest building in an area where access is ordinarily required, it is important to contact English Nature immediately for advice. It may be possible in exceptional circumstances, if contact is made early enough, to consider relocating the nest, but if this is not possible, it may be necessary to ensure the area is not disturbed until breeding has been completed.

If you find an injured adult or juvenile peregrine, it is important that you do not attempt to take care of the injured bird. You should contact English Nature, RSPB or the RSPCA if you find a stranded or injured bird, these organisations will be able to put you in touch with a reputable rescue centre.

Further information and advice

If you would like further advice or information on encouraging breeding peregrines, or if this magnificent species is already present on your area, then please contact English Nature, or the Hawk and Owl Trust, for advice.

English Nature (London Office) tel: 020 7340 4870
email: pete.massini@english-nature.org.uk

Hawk and Owl Trust c/o Zoological Society of London, Regent's
Park, London NW1 4RY
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The Hawk and Owl Trust are undertaking research into urban peregrines. Please contact the Project Officer at the above address, or email nickdixondevon@aol.com