

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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PEREGRINES ARE FLYING FREE AND ON THEIR OWN AS BIOLOGISTS DEPART

Washington, D.C.'s, peregrine falcons are on their own.

The four endangered birds of prey who grew up and learned to fly atop the Interior Department building, taking their first flights amid the cluster of government buildings near the White House, are now independently taking their own food.

"We are greatly encouraged by these first solid signs that the experiment is working well," said Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus, who placed the young birds atop the building June 20, in a ceremony designed to focus public attention on restoring peregrines to a portion of their former range.

The husband and wife team that monitored their development this summer in an innovative restoration project left earlier this month. Biologist Tom Allan and his wife, Sharon, who cared for the peregrines from the time they were placed in a man-made "hack box" through their first hesitant rooftop flights, departed August 6 as the birds became self-sufficient.

The peregrines' independence successfully caps the first phase of the joint project by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Cornell University's Peregrine Fund to restore the species to its former range in the Eastern United States. That range included Washington, D.C., and other major East Coast cities before the pesticide DDT interfered with the peregrine's reproduction.

This local project--the first attempt to restock the endangered peregrine in a major U.S. metropolitan area--began in June with the placement of a male and three female captive-bred, month-old chicks in a special nest.

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Scientists decided to try an urban area because of high rates of loss in remote rural areas to great horned owls and other predators and because of Washington's ample supply of wild pigeons for food.

The peregrines' growth and safety were monitored by remote control, using television cameras. After their release from their box in early July, the birds hopped about the rooftop, testing their wings and making short flights from the edge.

Their first ventures were confined to a downtown section of government buildings such as the General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management (Civil Service), and Old Executive Office buildings. Slowly they broadened their range to include a wider section of the city, captivating office workers who followed their flights.

The first female to depart the roof was named "Rachel" in honor of the late Rachel Carson, the author, former Fish and Wildlife Service employee, and critic of pesticides, who won national acclaim in 1962 with her bestseller, Silent Spring, which chronicled the damage to fish, wildlife, and birds such as the peregrine from DDT contamination.

Now 3 months old, the peregrine falcons are full-grown, about the size of crows, with a wingspan of nearly 2½ feet. The birds are expected to remain in the Washington area for the next several months, residing on some of the cliff-like buildings and monuments they favor.

The birds appear to have adjusted to their new environment and established territories quite well. One has been reported near a suburban Virginia shopping center, while another has apparently chosen the Department of Commerce building as a roost and the Mall near the Smithsonian Institution as its territory.

The three females wear special leg bands, marked "CM5," "CM6," and "CM7" in large type for easy identification, and blue and white tail streamers, denoting that they are captive-bred peregrines. The male has evaded all attempts at recapture to remove a small radio transmitter attached to its leg, which was used in tracking the birds immediately after their release. The radio is designed to drop off as its stitching deteriorates, however.

It is not known whether any of the four peregrines will remain in the Washington area through the winter, relying on its constant source of pigeons as food. The falcons may migrate as much as several hundred miles south along the Atlantic coast.

Similarly, it is not known whether all or some of the peregrines will choose to return to Washington next year. The hope is that within 2 years they will select mates from other captive-bred peregrines released by Cornell in the East, and eventually produce young, reestablishing themselves as a viable population in their former range.

"The success of this first venture demonstrates the feasibility of releasing birds such as the peregrine falcon in the urban environment," said Lynn Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "We have crossed the first major hurdle in helping to reestablish this endangered species in its former range."