

A photograph of a falcon in flight against a clear blue sky, with a city skyline visible in the background. The falcon is positioned in the upper left quadrant, flying towards the right. The city buildings are in the lower half of the frame, with a prominent multi-story building on the right side.

Aged Falcon

Still Knocks
'em dead at 250 mph

Eighteen-year-old bird still
defends downtown territory

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LOWELL WASHBURN

An adult female peregrine falcon, band number 63B, returns to her nest at the American Republic Insurance Building in Des Moines. The bird was unidentified until staff writer and falconer Lowell Washburn went atop the building and secured this photo last summer. The band number revealed that the 4-year-old falcon was produced at Omaha's Woodmen Tower.





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*Help support peregrines with a donation.
Send checks to DNR Wildlife Diversity Fund,
Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources,
1436 255th St., Boone, IA 50036-7557.*

For any red-blooded raptor enthusiast, the ear piercing wails were unmistakable. The nesting peregrines were agitated.

Sensing an eminent threat to their young, the falcons lost no time in launching the attack. With ear piercing screams and high speed dives, the pair engaged in a valiant effort to defend their nest. But in spite of their bravery, the falcons were clearly outmatched. Armed with helmets, protective clothing and miscellaneous repelling gear, the intruding humans were as committed to their mission as the falcons were to theirs.

Within the span of a few short minutes, the peregrines' four downy chicks had been extracted from their cave-like lair at the top of Des Moines' American Republic Insurance Building. After being placed into a plastic pet carrier, the birds were hoisted to a waiting team of DNR wildlife biologists. The first order of business was to collect a blood sample from each nestling. Then, after being weighed, measured and banded, the chicks were quickly returned to the nest. Although the adults remained clearly and vocally disturbed by the proceedings, life soon began a return to normal for Iowa's most famous urban raptors.

As politicians know, it's hard to keep a secret in downtown Des Moines. By now, the morning's commotion had drawn the attention of a crowd of gawking onlookers. None were more excited than veteran wildlife watcher and peregrine enthusiast Todd Hill of Des Moines.

"The day we come up here to band the baby peregrines is my very favorite day of the year," proclaimed Hill, a former employee of the American Republic maintenance staff.

Hill has enjoyed a long, and sometimes painful, association with these unique downtown residents. While working on the building's roof, he's been soundly thumped on more than a few occasions.

So why would one of America's rarest bird nesters make the Metro its home? The answer is simple. Located in the heart of Capitol City's downtown business area, the insurance building's upper level is pocked with decorative alcoves. For cliff dwelling peregrine falcons, the concrete



TOP: Learn more about peregrine history and review searchable databases of banded birds by locale online at <http://midwestperegrine.org/>. **SECOND FROM TOP:** A peregrine falcon chick surveys its surroundings from atop a Mississippi River cliff ledge. As a direct result of efforts of the Iowa Peregrine Falcon Recovery Team, wild peregrines are currently returning to recolonize historic eyries up and down the Upper Mississippi. **SECOND FROM BOTTOM:** Falcons continue to recolonize historic cliff ledge eyries of the Upper Mississippi river. During 2007, expanding falcon populations established a new modern-day record. Twelve active breeding territories were inventoried with 10 successful nests producing 23 fledged young. A victim of DDT contamination, the species entirely disappeared from the Mississippi River during the 1960s. The falcons' successful restoration to natural cliff sites results from efforts of the Iowa Peregrine Falcon Recovery Team. From 1995 to 2000, the group's volunteers raised more than \$100,000 needed to purchase and release 107 captive reared, young peregrines. **BOTTOM:** DNR staff writer, photographer and licensed falconer Lowell Washburn was instrumental in Iowa peregrine falcon recovery efforts.



ABOVE: The DNR's Pat Schlarbaum under attack atop the eight-story-American Republic Building in Des Moines. As Pat moves to inspect a nest below, a peregrine delivers a sneak attack to the back of his head. Pat appears to barely catch himself on the roof edge. A fall would have been fatal. As Pat retreats, the falcon attains a second "radar lock" and the hit raises his jacket hood. "You kind of expect the unexpected. The main thing is not to get caught by surprise," he says. The hood prevents talons from tangling in his hair or collar. "You kind of absorb it and keep going. More accidents occur trying to avoid getting hit. That's what I tell the window washers—just do what you intend to accomplish." Larry's Window Service in Des Moines use suspended scaffolds to lower a crew to the nests. The washers place young falcons into a Porta-Kennel to hand up to Pat, who bands the young falcons before they are returned. "The window washers are incredible advocates for the birds. They've done as much for peregrine appreciation as anybody," he says.

recesses represent the perfect place to lay eggs and rear young.

"We see all kinds of people here," says Hill. "Many bring binoculars to view the nest—especially when the young are visible. People come from all over. This has become a very popular attraction."

Peregrines first began nesting at American Republic in 1993. Since that time, the nest has become a statewide draw, partly due to the fact that the rare birds can easily be seen and heard from nearby sidewalks and courtyards.

A focus of the fame surrounding the site is peregrine falcon number 93T. He's the male of the territory. A superstar among peregrines, 93T is currently the best known, oldest and one of the most successful falcons in the history of the species' 30-year, modern-day recovery.

Released in Des Moines as a 45-day-old fledgling by the DNR's Wildlife Diversity Team in 1990, 93T returned to claim downtown during the spring of 1993. He's returned every year since, and has produced an incredible 42 young. He has outlived two mates, and is currently on territory with his third partner—a 4-year-old, wild produced female (63B) hatched at Woodmen Tower in Omaha.

Peregrine falcons are the planet's most dynamic bird species. Top Guns and masters of flight, peregrines feed exclusively on other birds obtained by spectacular high speed chase. It's a dangerous way to live, and wrecks can be fatal. It's easy to understand why most falcons never reach old age. Nevertheless, it is probable that during the past 17 years, 93T, while providing for himself, mates and young, has survived an estimated 10,000 successful kills—all without so much as chipping a talon.

"This bird is a real hunter and takes good care of his family," says Hill. "We find all kinds of evidence on the sidewalk beneath the nest. Most of the prey he brings in are starlings and flickers. We also see bigger things like pigeons and, once in a while, a duck. Most interesting is the really unusual stuff. The other day we found the head of a screech owl. That was surprising," said Hill.


"Watching the falcons is really exciting," he adds. "Usually we just see them carry in food from somewhere else. But one day when I was leaving work, I saw him smack a pigeon right out of the air. That was the best.

"Another time I got to assist one of the young. The baby falcon had just left the nest and was stuck in a small tree in our courtyard. I called DNR and they said to take the bird back to the roof. I did, and its next flight was successful," says Hill.

That rescue left an impression. "We still have a picture of that bird on the wall in our office," he says. 🐾

FLY WITH THE FALCONCAM

Watch live video of the Des Moines peregrine nest. Log on to iowadnr.com/wildlife/diversity/falconcam.html to see video and learn more about falcons.



TOP GUN— With sizzling high speed nose dives exceeding 250 mph, the peregrine falcon is the fastest and most dynamic bird species. But few peregrines can match the aerial prowess of downtown Des Moines' number 93T—an 18-year-old, tiercel (male) living atop the American Republic Insurance Building. Hatched in 1990, the falcon returned to stake his Des Moines territory in 1993. He's returned every year, has outlived two mates, is currently with his third partner, and has fathered and raised 42 young. In caring for himself, his mates, and babies— 93T has made an astounding 10,000 kills. In the photo, starling feathers from a kill remain on his beak as 93T rests on the building ledge. Look close inside the nostril to view a cone-shape cartilage baffle that prevents air from blowing out the back of the skull during high velocity dives.