

Transcription of Peregrine Falcon Chat with Dr. Todd Katzner

May 19, 2010, 7:00 – 8:00pm

katzner: Hi folks - sorry I am a bit late.

mindysmom: Hi, Dr. Katzner, thanks for coming.

summer2010: Hi Dr. Katzner.

katzner: So thank you all for coming and again, apologies for my being a bit late. Do we have a first question?

msw: When parents bring in prey without heads....is there some reason other than the parent is hungry?

katzner: Some mammals eat heads first, some birds may do that as well. However, I think many falcons behead their prey to kill them. I heard a story about a luncher in Market Square having a pigeon head drop into their lunch one day - from a peregrine. So in that case at least, they were not eating the head.

jbauman: I've watching the adult falcons at the Gulf Tower. It seems to me that the adult is spending much more time at the nest when compared to the falcons at the Cathedral of Learning. Is this unusual? I've been watching both nests the whole season.

katzner: This is highly variable from one bird to another. It will also depend on the age of the chicks. When chicks are younger, adults stay on the nest and they protect the young from temperature extremes. Chicks only begin to thermoregulate at about 15 days or so, before that they must have a parent around to protect them from high and low temperatures and sun and rain.

katzner: As the chicks age, they can regulate their own body temperature and so the parents can spend more time away - hunting.

penny3: Why did only Dorothy try to defend the chicks yesterday? Where was E2?

katzner: Female peregrine falcons tend to be more aggressive at the nest than males. This is characteristic of their behavior. So we often capture the adult females at the nest; we almost never get the adult males.

ladybugs: Is it more likely that these urban chicks will seek out an urban environment when they leave the nest? Do any settle in wild areas? Thanks!

katzner: That is a question we have been trying to answer for a while.

katzner: We are starting to see that there is not a strong correlation between where the chicks were hatched and where they settle. However, most peregrines are settling in urban settings these days and that is likely because there are lots of nesting places and lots of food in urban settings.

jetta: I have a question from mindysmom (she is working on the transcript): Dori helped her chicks to break out of their shells. How common is this behavior among peregrine mothers?

katzner: It certainly happens but i am not sure about the relative frequency - whether all parents do it or just some or whether it is a sign of a very good parent, etc.

tld-ajm: Why doesn't cached food make the chicks sick - isn't it rancid?

katzner: Wild animals tend to be better than people at handling food that may be a bit off. Remember - they eat raw meat all the time, but they also end up getting parasites and some disease, etc.

jbauman: Was the female at the Gulf Tower driven away or was she killed?

katzner: We don't know where Tasha2 (female at Gulf) is now - there are multiple possibilities and it is really hard to know. The one thing we know for sure is that she is not at the nest site!

Lagunagirl: I saw one of the chicks at Rachel Carson pecking at the last egg that wasn't viable (it had broken open). It looked like it was eating from it. Is this common?

katzner: Birds may sometimes eat their own eggs, but more commonly they just leave them in the nest and ignore them.

penny3: Since there are five pretty big babies, will they begin to fight in the scrape for room?

katzner: It is unlikely that the chicks will fight in the nest. If there is a shortage of food, chicks will sometimes kill each other (raptors are famous for "siblicide"), but there appears to be plenty of food here.

whitch: When do the chicks start throwing casts like the adults, or do they?

katzner: The chicks are coughing up pellets (casts) at this age.

mloo: Do falcons ever prey on other falcon nests? Thanks.

katzner: Yes, falcons can prey on other falcons, especially falcons of other species. When I studied eagles and falcons in Kazakhstan, I would sometimes find kestrels in the diet of saker falcons.

knitmaster36: Were you surprised that Dori's eggs hatched?

katzner: I was pleased that all 5 eggs hatched at the Gulf Tower, not completely surprised. Birds are descended from reptiles and their eggs can sustain some degree of temperature fluctuation. It is really good that it worked out that way - I'd say the probability was about 60-40, so we did well.

grannyscamry: Are there any plans for providing more peregrine nest boxes in Pittsburgh, especially since these 2 have been so successful?

katzner: At present I think there are no plans to provide more nest boxes; birds are already nesting on bridges without boxes and there are not too many other tall buildings that are not within the territories of existing birds.

vasilis: I hear the other Pitt area falcon sites, mainly in bridges like Tarentum & McKeesport, don't have chicks yet. Why you think that is?

katzner: Peregrines are all on their own schedules and some nests will be on eggs at this time of year, other nests will have chicks. One always has to be first!

jbauman: Will falcon eat poisonous snakes?

katzner: Peregrines almost always eat birds. Other species of falcons will eat snakes - kestrels in Europe eat reptiles on a regular basis, eagles definitely eat venomous snakes regularly.

msw: How far away do these fledglings go when they leave the nest to establish their own territory?

katzner: Dispersal by falcons is really neat - we have a project studying that right now. Birds from Pitt have gone all over the eastern USA - Toronto, Wisconsin, Niagara, etc.

JoanCFlynn: Dori & Louie at Gulf Tower seem to be very companionable - they are in the scrape together a lot compared to the other "couples", they seem to have conversations as well. Is this normal behavior or is it because they are a new couple?

katzner: It is difficult to know why the birds spend lots of time together on the nest, but it is really neat. We need a social worker to answer that one :)

mloo: How high up on the COL is this nest?

katzner: Nest at Cathedral is about on the 40th, at Gulf about 37th floor - near the top of each building.

Lagunagirl: When you said the chicks were throwing up pellets, what are the pellets made of? Thanks.

katzner: "Pellets" are regurgitated material that birds of prey cough up and are composed of all the materials they eat but cannot digest - hair, bones, feathers, beaks, talons, etc.

mwalker51: Why that awful spotlight on the birds in Oakland at night?

katzner: We have an IR light on the birds at both sites so that the cameras will function better - we are trying to make that work in the best way possible and over the next year or two will try to make adjustments to make it best for the birds and for the people. What we cannot do is go out during the breeding season to make adjustments, so it is a slow process!

clownsharon: Hi Dr Katzner. Why is there no snapshot camera on the Gulf Tower?

katzner: We have two cameras at Pitt because we were able to get funding for them. They are expensive! At Gulf we only have one camera (money is limited). Perhaps we will try to get another camera there too, although for now we are just happy to have such good cameras at each site.

wepatsfans: Are there many falcons in NH?

katzner: I think there are about 17 occupied peregrine sites in NH, although I'm not sure how many are on buildings and how many on cliffs - probably some of each.

Lagunagirl: What is the range that a falcon family needs and not encroach on another family's range?

katzner: Peregrine nests are usually a couple of miles apart. The distance apart depends on the quality of the habitat - lots of food means you can have nests close together, less food means they will defend a larger area and there will be fewer nests.

oscarcat: What is happening when the birds are preening at this stage?

whitch: I suppose that the dark stains on the chicks are prey blood or are they feces?

katzner: The birds at this stage are learning how to use their wings - they need to exercise to build those flight muscles, soon they will be flying and using them a ton. The preening is just them being social and curious. The dark marks are their body feathers coming in - they are losing their down feathers and growing their contour (body) feathers and so we can see all those feathers coming in now!

Doty50: Since fledge week is about 1-1/2 weeks away, will they get all their remaining feathers in that short time?

katzner: Yep, all their body and flight feathers will come in really fast now. Remember, a feather is relatively easy to grow, body mass is tougher to grow. So the birds are already almost as heavy as they will be when they fledge, but now they need to grow those feathers!

katzner: The chicks will fledge and start moving farther and farther from the nest. The process starts with what we call "branching" - when chicks move onto "branches" near the nest (the word means less when a bird is on the building), then they fledge (take their first flight) then they build up flight muscles and become better fliers, but use the nest as a home base and eventually they will disperse and leave their parent's territory altogether - that will happen sometime in August/September, probably (Kate knows best when this happens around here!)

wepatsfans: The 2 big ones must be the females?

clownsharon: When will banding for the Gulf Tower be?

katzner: The large ones are females; banding at Gulf will be in early June.

tld-ajm: There has been a lot of concern over the condition (filth) at COL nest site. Does the mess affect their health?

katzner: The mess in the nest is somewhat normal, the birds should fledge ok - they almost never have blood parasites, which means they are doing ok.

msw: What is the likelihood that one of these chicks will become the mate to one of Gulf chicks?

katzner: We really can't say where these birds will disperse, so we can't say what is the likelihood that one will mate to a Gulf chick. It is a roll of the dice, except in this case those dice have lots of sides!

Lagunagirl: The ones that fledge from buildings--do more of them get injured if they fall than those that fall onto soil/plants/etc? I know last year one of the fledglings didn't make it due to injuries.

katzner: Some fledglings do have problems in urban settings, birds on bridges have actually had the most problems. Bridges should be similar to cliffs near rivers though, and peregrines are famous for nesting near rivers.

mloo: When the chicks fledge, will they come back to the nesting box for the night?

KPeregrine: In my experience - return to the nest at night after fledge: they will be on camera off & on as long as they're getting food at the nest. Their parents stop delivering food to the nest a couple days after the last one fledges.

Lagunagirl: Did these urban scrapes get started by the falcons and then "finished off" by humans or were they built by humans from the get go?

katzner: Nest boxes are usually put up when people see falcons in an area - it encourages the birds to nest there. But in other places, the birds do it on their own and sometimes they just ignore a nest box and pick a better spot!

wepatsfans: Do you think they will all make it to the ground?

katzner: Yes, a high percentage don't make it through that first year - that is the highest time of mortality. I don't know the exact percentage, but I'd guess somewhere between 40-60%.

oscarcat: How much will an adult eat in a day?

katzner: An adult probably only needs one prey item per day, but a growing chick could need 1-2, per chick, so the parents need to kill at least one prey item per chick if they can!!!!

Lagunagirl: What is the biggest cause of them not making it? Predators? Injuries? Both?

katzner: Causes of mortality are usually predators, injuries or other falcons. Peregrines don't have too many predators, but young birds are stupid. They also hit buildings and get electrocuted a lot.

Lagunagirl: They hit buildings? The windows or the actual material of the building?

katzner: Birds often see reflections in windows and don't recognize that they can't fly through a window. This has happened several times in Pittsburgh and resulted in early death or injury for several of our birds.

mloo: Will Dorothy and E2 have another brood on this nesting box this summer?

katzner: Peregrines don't have more than one brood per season, so I wouldn't expect more than this one brood.

wepatsfans: How can I get more info on falcons in NH?

katzner: I would check the NH DNR web page and check contacts there, whichever agency manages natural systems and wildlife there will be the one in charge and they will have info - I don't remember who it is off the top of my head. Google is a wonderful thing!

katzner: www.wildlife.state.nh.us

grannyscamry: Do siblings recognize each other after fledging?

katzner: Siblings would rarely recognize each other, but their dispersal patterns are so long distance that they will rarely encounter full siblings, which is good for gene pools!

espyville-bob: We have a large nest at the top of a cell tower in Crawford county (Espyville) it seems to be made from sticks; do you think that they could be falcons?

katzner: Falcons don't build nests from sticks - they steal nests from other birds. It is one of their really cool characteristics. So if you have a large stick nest, it is almost certainly an osprey, red-tail hawk or eagle!

katzner: I'll take two more questions, starting with Vasilis, ok?

vasilis: What will it take for the Peregrines to get removed from PA's endangered list, like they're off Federal list. You expect that to be soon or many years away?

katzner: Peregrines were delisted federally in 1999; they are still a PA endangered species. Historically there were ~45 nests in PA, all on cliffs. The Game Commission will consider them recovered when the population gets to ~22 cliff nesting pairs with at least 1.25 chicks per nest produced on average. Right now there is a talk about considering whether or not to downgrade them to threatened, but we will see if that happens. Right now there are about 25 nests in PA, but most on buildings and only 4 or so on cliffs.

whitch: I assume that a blood sample was taken at banding; is DNA done?

katzner: Blood was taken; this is for parasitology analysis, not genetics. Right now we don't have a good reason to do the genetics, it would be interesting possibly at some time though!

tld-ajm: THANKS AND Final QUESTION: Dr. Katzner - did you have anything you want to ask us? <G>

tld-ajm: KPEREGRINE IS A PEREGRINE EXPERT AND WILL STICK AROUND TO ANSWER QUESTIONS AFTER DR. KATZNER LEAVES.

katzner: Thank you all for your time and support of the peregrine falcon program.

katzner: When we do conservation work, we are rarely recognized for our efforts. It is really a great joy to do work and receive such positive feedback from such a large group. Thank you all again for your time and support of this program, you should all give yourselves a pat on the back for participating - it means a great deal to all of us and, believe it or not, to the birds as well!

katzner: Have a good evening, folks.

sno_leopard: Thanks again for your time Dr. Katzner!

karenva_admin: Education is the biggest key.

tld-ajm: Your work honors us all.

Dotty50: Now I know the large stick nest four blocks away from my house is probably red-tail hawks -- awesome! Thanks Dr. K, and everyone.

KPeregrine: Yes, thank you, Todd! I will stick around & answer questions based on my experience with the Pitt peregrines.

Transcription of Peregrine Falcon Chat with Dr. Todd Katzner

May 19, 2010, 8:00 – 9:00pm

Follow-Up Questions Answered by Kate St. John

KPeregrine: Thank you, Todd! I will stick around & answer questions based on my experience with the Pitt peregrines.

beccab75: Kate, during cleaning we noticed that Beth Fife was putting something in her glove. Do you know what she was collecting?

KPeregrine: becca, I didn't notice that Beth put anything into her glove. I'll have to review the archives.

TheWildSow: Now that we know the babies are coughing up casts, I think the glove things were casts!

Lagunagirl: It's amazing (and sad) all that effort goes into feeding these chicks and the mortality rate is so high.

KPeregrine: The mortality rate includes death before fledging. At wild cliff sites like Acadia National Park, they die in years of bad cold weather. Pitt COL has a high success (life) rate.

whitch: Do you think that the majority of the debris in the nest was from birds other than pigeons?

KPeregrine: Debris looked to be quite mixed. Dominant species was pigeon.

whitch: So that means that Dorothy was the one bringing in the pigeons?

KPeregrine: Both Dorothy & E2 bring in pigeons. When the chicks are being brooded I have noticed the male tends to bring in smaller prey.

beccab75: Do they analyze the debris?

KPeregrine: It will be identified by species but not otherwise analyzed. I will ask Dr. Katzner about the plans.

jetta: I asked the question about food entering the stomach from the crop, because some people on chat thought that Dori was working the food from the crop to her stomach when she was doing contortions with her mouth and head. I didn't think that was the case. Was she working a feather down or preparing to regurgitate a cast?

KPeregrine: "Working her crop" jetta your suggestions about the real reason are correct!

beccab75: Do mating pairs stay together year round? Or go their separate ways?

KPeregrine: It depends on the site & the individuals. Example: COL has lots of year-round food. Dorothy & E2 stay all year. Dorothy's previous mate, Erie, used to leave for 4-6 weeks in the fall - around October.

tld-ajm: When will the chicks start ledge hopping? I keep waiting for one to plop over the edge of the box.

KPeregrine: What to expect when they ledge-walk: They walk off the nest but are standing/walking on the building. Camera viewers will think they've fallen. Not. They walked away. :)

KPeregrine: A better description without typos is here: <http://www.wqed.org/birdblog/peregrine-faqs/question-do-they-fledge-all-at-once/>

beccab75: I've seen the babies swallow long feathers...is this harmful?

KPeregrine: I believe the chicks are getting needed nutrients from eating the feathers. They are growing feathers, after all.

KPeregrine: Also it's possible they eat them as roughage.

KPeregrine: The chicks act pretty silly sometimes. Wait 'til they perch under the snapshot cam!

jetta: When do the chicks start to eat grit?

KPeregrine: I think they're eating grit already - a.k.a. bird bones, feathers, etc.

vasilis: Too bad there isn't a zoom out camera view to see larger area when they hop around.

KPeregrine: Pitt streaming cam is zoomed out as far as it will go. Snapshot cam will be zoomed out in next few days. The space is very tight compared to Gulf.

tld-ajm: Kate - I've noticed that the chicks heads seem to turn the whole way around - do they or am I just imagining it? Sorta like an owl.

KPeregrine: No they can't turn as much as owls but they can turn more than we do!

knitmaster36: When they huddle like they are right now - I understand when it's windy, cold, but do they naturally do this anyway?

KPeregrine: They do this as babies and only seem to give up on it when they are no longer babies and/or when it's very very hot.

beccab75: Kate--I think I read somewhere that sometimes nesting pairs will chase off invading falcons together, but sometimes it's female vs. female and male vs. male. Is it true that they sometimes chase off together and if so what accounts for the different situations?

KPeregrine: I don't have any experience of an entire fight. I have seen Dorothy & E2 chase together but at some point (I have not seen) the fight gets down to 1-on-1 and the other sex does not join in... perhaps because the winner will be their mate & it would be bad to pick sides ;)

KPeregrine: Thank you for reading my blog. I enjoy writing it. I am very happy so many people are enjoying it. In April it was more popular than WQED's homepage. Wow! I didn't know there were so many of you!

beccab75: How rare or common is the Gulf Tower situation?

KPeregrine: Quite common to see a change of individuals at these prime sites. Cleveland's Terminal Tower had a change of males this season. The female - still there - is one of Tasha's kids

KPeregrine: These changes do not occur until the individual is weaker than intruder(s). They are not challenged every year - only when appear old/weak.

beccab75: Thanks Kate--and to have eggs from two different parents - is that common as well?

KPeregrine: That is uncommon. Personally I have to hand it to Louie for pulling that one off & convincing Dori to lay in Tasha's scrape.

Lagunagirl: Why were the chicks taken out of the nest?

KPeregrine: So they could be banded indoors. Banded: so we know where they go (if we ever see them again)
<http://www.wqed.org/birdblog/peregrine-faqs/question-why-and-how-are-peregrines-banded/>

Lagunagirl: Do the parents go crazy when the chicks are taken?

KPeregrine: Yes, they are parents and their enemy is taking their kids. HOWEVER, they see this happen every year so they fight it but know it will end & all will be OK. Still, Dorothy stayed mad at Beth.

<http://www.wqed.org/birdblog/2010/05/18/three-boys-and-two-girls/>

Lagunagirl: When the parents go crazy, do they fly around squawking or hang out in the scrape looking for their chicks?

KPeregrine: Depends on what bander does. Beth usually collects the females so they come indoors (this is not typical - every site is different). Males fly around. Last year Louie at Gulf Tower perched by the window & looked in. First time he ever did that. Sweet dad-bird.

jetta: Amazing about Louie watching the banding!

KPeregrine: err.. Louie couldn't see the banding - it was in another part of the room. He was looking into the window where his wife & kids disappeared.

beccab75: I was amazed to learn that PA has 25 nests....we have 3 or 4 here in PGH right?

KPeregrine: We have 6 - 4 on bridges.

KPeregrine: Tarentum has a pair. Beth Fife will check again to see if they laid eggs. They're newbies so might not lay successfully this year.

TheWildSow: Cathedral, Gulf, Tarentum, McKees Rocks, E. Rochester.....where is #6?

KPeregrine: Awwwww I'll have to let out the subject of a blog coming up next week. #6 is Westinghouse Bridge.

TheWildSow: Westinghouse Bridge?? Cool, I'll look out for peregrines next time I'm over there.

KPeregrine: You probably won't see anything at Westinghouse Bridge. They are incubating.

beccab75: Was McKees Rocks active this year?

KPeregrine: No eggs at last year's site at McKees Rocks when Beth checked in late April. Peregrine falcons have been seen though!

TheWildSow: Last week I was driving up 28 and thought I saw a lone peregrine flying between 62nd & Highland Park bridges. I thought -- Tasha??!

TheWildSow: Maybe Dori grabbed her nest so she grabbed Dori's old stomping grounds <g>

KPeregrine: 62nd has a nest box. Who knows? Dori hung out at 62nd until she came downtown.

Antilogical: You're kidding, Kate! I cross that bridge regularly, and have never seen them.

KPeregrine: Peregrine falcons are sneaky at nesting time. During incubation you'd think they left town. Nope. Just sneaky. It's hard to be sneaky later when kids are screaming for food.

KPeregrine: Pittcam is foggy until complete darkness. It's having a low-light-level issue at dawn & dusk but cannot be fixed until after chicks fly.