

New video stars receive health check before leaving the nest

by Linda Lyman

Like many youngsters in the Pittsburgh area, Dorothy's five kids will probably move away once they leave the nest. The peregrine falcon chicks, hatched a few weeks ago on a ledge outside the 40th floor of the Cathedral of Learning in Oakland, may even travel to other states to set up housekeeping. In the past, several of the chicks hatched in the Pittsburgh area are known to have relocated to Niagara Falls and Cleveland.

Before they get old enough to fly off, which will probably occur in three to four weeks, the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the National Aviary brought the chicks inside on May 18 to give them a health checkup and to secure identification bands on their legs.

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Mother peregrine falcon, Dorothy, looks through a window on the 40th floor of the Cathedral of Learning.

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They also brought Dorothy inside to take blood samples, listen to her heart and lungs, and assess her health.

While Dorothy was clearly not happy with the procedure, she remained fairly quiet during handling. Her chicks, however, screamed their displeasure as they were weighed, had blood samples taken and were given inoculations. The final step in the process was to affix both a state and a federal identification band to their legs.

Unlike most other falcon mothers, Dorothy apparently never learned to clean up her nesting site. That allowed researchers to collect the debris from the nest box and analyze what urban falcons eat. The birds typically catch small to medium birds in mid-air.

Some of what they eat is already known from watching the parents bring pigeons to the chicks through the web camera system set up by Bill Powers of PixController. Viewers have watched as eggs



Beth Fife of the Pennsylvania Game Commission holds a peregrine falcon chick from the Cathedral of Learning nest. Fife had brought all five chicks into the building for a vet check and banding.

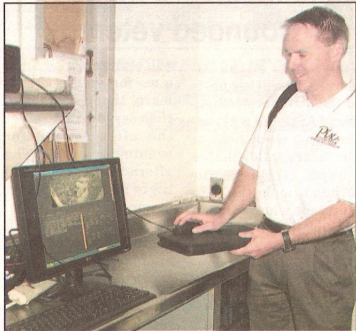
most widespread birds of prey, but the use of the pesticide DDT caused the shells of their eggs to be brittle and break before the chicks matured.

In 1966, there were no falcons nesting east of the Mississippi River. Because of this, falcons were one of the first groups listed on the national register of endangered species in the 1970s.

DDT was banned and falcon recovery programs started. Since 1991, there have been 66 chicks hatched at the Gulf Tower site. The Cathedral of Learning nest, established

in 2002, has been the birthplace of 31 chicks.

While there are now 25 nests established in Pennsylvania, most are on buildings or bridges. Only four or five are located on natural nesting sites, such as cliff ledges. Until at least half the original 45 pre-DDT nesting sites have been re-established in natural areas, the birds will remain on the Pennsylvania endangered list, although they have been removed from the federal list. Recovery in the east has been somewhat slower than in the west.



Bill Powers of PixController adjusts the falcon camera that allows viewers to watch the Cathedral of Learning nesting site

were laid and hatched. Now, viewers can observe the chicks as baby down feathers are replaced with flight feathers and as they stretch and stretch those wings in preparation for the time they fly off to find mates and set up their own nesting sites.

The nest at the Cathed-

ral, along with one on the Gulf Towers building, are part of the Urban Falcon Recovery Program, a project of the National Aviary. This year, each pair of birds laid and hatched five eggs rather than the more normal three or four.

Peregrine falcons were historically one of the



Mother peregrine falcon Dorothy is unwrapped by the veterinarians after being brought inside for a checkup.